



From the Heavens

A Torquere Press Arcana
by Vic Winter

Prologue

Dirk washed out the back of the bus, hose alive and cold in his hand. He watched as the water pouring out of the bus and onto the ground slowly -- so damned slowly, there was so much blood

lost today, too much, too many -- ran clear. Then he used the hose to chase all the water down the drain, the cement floor shining wetly under the florescent lights.

He turned the water off and wound the hose back up, ready for the next bus, and then he restocked. He checked the supplies missing against those used according to his report, re-filled the shelves and bags, signed his paperwork and left it in Pritchard's inbox.

He clocked out.

God, he was tired. He was tired and he hurt somewhere deep inside. Twenty-eight patients today. Twenty-eight treated and only twelve were still alive. Fourteen DOAs and two who didn't make it much past the hospital doors.

Some days he hated his job. Some days the crushing deaths, the people he couldn't save overshadowed everything, overshadowed the lives he did save, the ones who went home to families and loved ones.

Dirk sat behind the wheel of his car in the parking lot and stared out the windshield, the pain slowly morphing into a numbness. Eventually he turned the engine over and headed home.

He stopped at the drive-through, not because he was hungry -- because he wasn't, not even a little bit, even though he hadn't had a chance to eat all day -- but because he was late and Gerry'd no doubt cooked and was going to light into him for ruining yet another supper. He figured if he brought food home with him, he could forestall some of the yelling. The food filled his car with the smell of grease, making him feel vaguely nauseous.

The apartment was dark when he got home.

"Gerry?" He called out, dumping his keys on the table by the door, and flipped on the hall light.

There was no answer. And the place felt closed up, empty.

He headed toward the living room and flipped on the light in there, needing the place lit up, needing it to not be dark. Where was Gerry? Not in the living room, there was no sign of him at all.

The dining table at the far end of the room was set, so Dirk headed for it, frowning as he realized supper was set out: a roast that was cold and dry, a scary looking bowl of mashed potatoes, glazed carrots that had gone limp and oily, and the saddest salad he'd ever seen.

There was a note on his plate.

Chapter One

Dirk swung his backpack over his shoulders and nodded at Mrs. McGaven. "Thanks for the lunch, ma'am."

"Don't you 'ma'am' me, boy -- I'm not that old yet. And you're welcome." She picked up a pamphlet and showed him the map on the back. "You stick to the marked trails. Green or yellow -- red is for experienced hikers and climbers. And when you hit four o'clock, you make sure you're on your way back -- it gets mighty dark out here once the sun goes down."

"I'll be fine, Mrs. McGaven," he assured her, neglecting to tell her he didn't have a watch. He'd come out here to leave it all behind. The job, the boyfriend who was gone, even time. "Bye." He gave her a wave and headed out, the crisp autumn air trying to slide beneath his sweater and nip at his skin. He did up the last couple of buttons on his jacket and followed the western path off toward the hills.

Mrs. McGaven's place was set right in the middle of a bunch of rather large hills that were masquerading as mountains. It was rustic, both inside and out, but had hot and cold running water, indoor toilets, a complex and varied set of hiking trails around it, and one magic ingredient: Mrs. McGaven was an amazing cook. Dirk's buddy Trent had recommended the place and after two days here, Dirk had to say he was glad he'd trusted Trent's opinion.

He started off on a green trail and then took a yellow one that veered away from the hills and meandered deeper into the valley. About an hour in, he headed off to the right, following a red trail. He wasn't sure why exactly he didn't follow Mrs. McGaven's advice, except he'd come out here to get away from it all, especially people. His first two days had proven that the green and yellow trails were fairly high traffic. Dirk was hoping the red trails would prove to be far less populated.

They were.

He found the lake about two and a half hours in. One minute he was trudging through the forest, the next he'd stepped out into a clearing, a still lake reflecting the sun back into the sky. It was beautiful, stunning in fact, although maybe his enthusiasm was colored by the fact that the place was absolutely deserted.

And peaceful.

Dirk pulled a blanket out of his backpack and spread it on the ground by the water's edge. Sitting, he went through his bag, pulling out the lunch prepared by Mrs. McGaven. He ate the sandwich, barely noticing the taste, and left the rest in its bag for later -- he wasn't really hungry. Hell, he hadn't been hungry in weeks, eating because he knew he needed to rather than because he had any desire for food.

Then he sat there, watching the water and thinking.

His mind wandered. He thought about his mom and the cousins. He thought about the crazy lady who lived on the corner near work who he brought ice cream for. She liked the mocha and he'd

take her a cone once a week, usually on Monday because Mondays were hard for a lot of people. Every now and then he'd mix it up and bring her maple walnut or pistachio or strawberry because he liked the different colors. She never complained, but her eyes would light up the next time he brought the mocha again.

He thought about Gerry and why Gerry had left him, and he remembered their last argument, the sound of the slap as Gerry's hand connected with his face. That sound had rung in his ears for ages and then his cheek finally registered the pain, the sting feeling necessary in the sudden and terrible silence that followed the slamming of the door. Gerry hadn't stayed away though.

That time.

He'd come back and they'd both apologized and made love, and Dirk didn't know why people were so into make-up sex. He always felt awkward and weird about it. Sure he let go of whatever had caused the argument and what they'd said during it, but he found getting back into that comfortable, easy-to-be-with-Gerry spot was a slow process and not a sudden rush.

Two days later Gerry had gone again. For good this time -- he'd taken his clothes and his books and the ugly little Buddha statue that Dirk had always said he hated, but secretly loved.

And sometime in the afternoon, sitting there by the idyllic lake, Dirk had kept his thoughts away from the dead for long enough, for as long as he could, and he finally let them come. He remembered them all, each person he'd worked on and hadn't saved. He didn't always remember their names, sometimes he'd never even known them, but he remembered their faces and their injuries, their stats at the beginning, during the course of treatment. Their deaths.

He remembered each and every one and then he let them go.

He offered their memories up to the trees, the lake, the sky. He threw a stone into the lake for each one, his arm tired by the time he was done, but his heart lighter, easier.

And when he was done, he lay back down and closed his eyes.

And slept.

It was late when Dirk woke; night fell heavily out here, with no lights to brighten the dark. But that meant he could see all the stars in the sky and they were amazing. The Milky Way cut a huge, bright path across the sky. A million stars. A billion. Maybe a million billion. It made him feel tiny and insignificant. He was just one man on one planet in one solar system where there were a bazillion of them out there. It was kind of peaceful, too, though, knowing that when he was gone, hell when the earth was no more and the sun gone supernova, the universe would still be there doing its thing.

His stomach growled and he needed to piss, so Dirk took care of business and washed his hands in the cool water of the lake. Then he checked out what was left in the lunch Mrs. McGaven had packed for him. There was a container of homemade applesauce complete with cinnamon and

cloves, nutmeg and something else he couldn't identify. And there was a huge oatmeal cookie bar of some sort that had raisins and nuts in it that tasted good enough on its own and unbelievably amazing when dipped into the applesauce. It was only after he'd eaten his fill and wrapped the last half of the cookie back up that it dawned on him that he'd been hungry. It had been so long since food had been anything other than fuel that he had to remember to eat.

Whether it was the country air, Mrs. McGaven's food, or his little purging ceremony this afternoon, he didn't know. But he took it as a good sign. He wasn't ready to go back to the real world yet -- hell he was barely into day four of a six week sabbatical from it all -- but he could see how eventually he'd get to where he needed to be. Already the ghosts of the people he couldn't save were fading, finding peace and leaving him some as well.

And Gerry's defection... well he wasn't very broken up over that, truth be told. If he looked back at things it had been over for quite awhile. In fact he couldn't be sure it had ever really begun. Gerry had accused him once of having more passion for his job than his lover, and Dirk had to wonder if Gerry hadn't been right. He hoped Gerry found someone to love him the way the man needed to be loved to be happy. He truly did.

Dirk tossed another rock into the lake, adding Gerry to the pile of people he was letting go of out here. He didn't have to carry that burden any more. Then he lay back, looking up into the sky.

His eyes lazily traced the constellations: Orion's belt and the Ursas -- major and minor. The little dipper, the big one. He wondered about the Greeks who had lain beneath the night sky, just like he was but thousands of years ago. All those stories for the constellations... had that Greek man felt as tiny in the universe as Dirk did? Though he knew far better than his imaginary Greek just how tiny the earth, the sun even, were in the universal scheme of things.

An owl hooted and something that he thought was probably a bat flew momentarily between him and the stars. He thought he heard the splash of a fish leaping out of the water, but it didn't matter if he actually had or not, and he just let the sounds and the sights slowly fill him with a peace that he'd been sorely lacking. The sand under his ass was soft rather than hard, and he figured he was in just about the best place in the universe he could be right now.

A shooting star flew across the sky and almost without thinking Dirk wished on it. He wished for a companion who was friend *and* lover to share his life with. As soon as he'd made the wish he snorted at himself, but when he thought about it, he thought maybe it wasn't such a bad wish after all. His life was littered with exes who'd, in the end, been friends *or* lovers. He'd never really had both in one person.

Of course shooting stars were actually meteors, anyway, and... he stopped himself. There was no reason to ruin the magic for himself. He let his wish stand.

He was half-dozing sometime later when he thought he heard something. Like maybe his name. He didn't know anyone out here though, aside from Mrs. McGaven, and it was unlikely she was even up this late at night, let alone wandering the paths looking for him. When he heard it again, he figured he was dreaming. The third call was accompanied by a point of light dancing on the lake and he sat up, blinking in the direction it was coming from.

“Hello?” he called out, feeling like a bit of an idiot. At least until he was answered.

“Dirk? Is your name Dirk Waters?” The light came closer, blinding him, though he definitely heard footsteps, so it wasn’t *just* a disembodied voice in the light.

He put up his hand, shielding his eyes from the light and trying to see beyond it. “Um. Yeah, it is.”

“Well, thank God for that.” It seemed like an odd thing for a stranger to say and for a moment Dirk thought maybe this was the friend and lover he’d wished for. Then the voice spoke again and what it said next seemed to make even less sense.

“Base, this is three. I’ve got him. Repeat, I have the package. I’ll check in when I’ve assessed him. Do you copy? Over.”

“Copy that, three. Package acquired. Condition to be assessed. Over.”

“That’s it. Over and out.”

The light finally slid away from Dirk’s face, hitting the ground beside him instead. Dirk squinted to see the guy who went with it. Oh, whoever he was, he was cute. He had big brown curls and a friendly face. The uniform fit nicely, too. The hat was sexy. Jesus, it was a park ranger or something.

He scrambled to his feet, just about the time the ranger asked if he was okay, if he was injured.

“No, I’m fine.” Why would he be hurt? Hell, why were there rangers out looking for him in the first place? He’d obviously been napping too long and was fuzzy headed. “What’s going on?”

“I’m a member of the search team out to find you.”

“Find me? What the hell for?” He didn’t mean to sound belligerent, but he wasn’t lost and he’d been enjoying the peace and quiet, and now there were flashlights and rangers and no doubt fifty million questions and forms and what the hell was going on here?

“Mrs. McGaven called us in. She said you were in trouble.”

He frowned; what was she -- his mother? “Why would she do that?”

“Apparently you told her you’d be back before dark. When you hadn’t made it back by nine, she called us in.”

Dirk snorted. “I didn’t tell her that -- she told me I should make sure I was heading back by four. I never agreed that I would. Besides, the last time I checked, I was an adult and Mrs. McGaven, nice old biddy though she is, is not my mother.”

“So I take it you’re not hurt.”

“No, I’m not.” He managed not to snort again.

“And you’re not lost.”

He did roll his eyes. Just because a man wanted a bit of privacy... “Nope. Not lost.”

It was the ranger’s turn to snort. He grabbed his radio off his belt and pressed a button. “Base, this is three. Package is fine. Repeat, there are no injuries. Over.”

There was a moment of nothing but static, then a click or two. “Gotcha, three. You can head home then, the paperwork can wait until morning. Over.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Base. Over and out.”

“Did she really send you out here to find me?” Dirk asked as soon as the walkie-talkie was replaced in the ranger’s belt.

He got a grin and a nod. “She did. Me and four other guys. Not the first time she’s sent us on a wild goose chase either. She’s got a fifty-fifty hit rate, though, on whether or not the folks she calls us for are actually lost or hurt. I guess I’d rather be out here finding folks who don’t need me than miss looking for others who really are lost, or worse.”

Dirk nodded. He could understand that, hell, he could appreciate it. Even if he did wish Mrs. McGaven had picked someone else to fret over.

“Oh, hey,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m Dirk Waters.”

“I know.” Even in the light from the flashlight, which didn’t seem nearly so bright now that his eyes were used to it, he could see the twinkle in the ranger’s eyes. “And I’m Wayne Barlow, park ranger.” Wayne said it with the same emphasis Buzz Lightyear gave “space ranger”. And Wayne grabbed his hand, giving him a firm, definitely manly shake. “Mind if I sit with you?” Wayne asked, nodding toward his section of beach, which he’d cleared of rocks and debris. “I’ve a few questions and stuff.”

“Not at all. Can you turn off the flashlight, though? It’s ruining my view.” Dirk pointed up toward the sky where the Milky Way seemed dimmer now.

The flashlight clicked off, and it left behind a darkness that only very slowly coalesced once more into a bright starry night. Wayne came to sit next to him, offering a warm smile that flashed brightly in his face.

Dirk lay back down, hands behind his head. “You don’t mind, do you? It’s the optimum viewing position.”

“Astronomer?” Wayne asked, lying down as well. Dirk could feel the warmth of his body in the cool night. “Oh, I can see what you mean, it’s stunning.”

“Not an astronomer -- I’m more a fan of the stars. I learned the constellations and stuff in Scouts. They don’t look anything like this in the city.”

“So is that why you’re out here in the middle of the night? You should have let Mrs. McGaven know and she wouldn’t have sent out the Calvary.”

“Nope, it’s not why.” Dirk sighed, wishing Mrs. McGaven wasn’t such a busy-body. The ritual to say goodbye was his -- it was private. “The awesome night sky was just a happy coincidence.”

“Say what?”

“I came out here for some peace, to let go of some bad stuff. When I was done I fell asleep and when I woke up it was dark. Aside from the fact I was enjoying the view, it seemed rather foolish to try to head back in the dark. Good enough?”

“Yep. Good enough. I’ll need your name, social security number -- all that kind of thing for my report, but otherwise-- oh! Are you suicidal?”

“Huh, what? No.”

“Sorry, standard question. Along with ‘did you deliberately set out to get lost for the purpose of requiring a manhunt to find you?’” Wayne looked like he felt silly asking the question.

“If I had, I’d hardly answer yes to that one.”

“You’d be surprised. We see all sorts in Search and Rescue.” Wayne’s lopsided grin was rather endearing.

Dirk snorted and then laughed right out loud. “I’m a paramedic. We see it all, and then some.” Okay, aside from the nosy questions, it was nice having some company. Specifically Wayne’s company.

Wayne did a double take at his words. “Paramedic? No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Looks like more than just the stars are a happy coincidence.” Wayne cleared his throat. “So your bad stuff was job related, was it?”

“Are we off the record?” Dirk didn’t really mind talking about it; he just didn’t want to find it on someone’s paperwork. Not to mention he’d discovered it wasn’t something most people wanted to talk about. Most of his ex-boyfriends included. Maybe even all of them. They thought it was sexy having an emergency rescue worker as a lover, but what was less sexy were the non-heroic moments, the ones that haunted Dirk.

“Yeah, Dirk. Off the record.” Wayne’s hand touched his arm briefly in an ‘I’m here and you’re not alone’ gesture that Dirk found comforting, relaxing.

“Then yeah, the bad stuff was job related. It feels incredible pulling someone back from the brink of death, you know? A real high.” Wayne nodded at him and Dirk figured that yeah, maybe Wayne did know. “The flip side to that is how hard it is to lose someone. Shit, I even hate it when they’re already gone when we get there -- what if we’d driven a little faster, or taken another route...”

“What ifs will drive you crazy, man.” Wayne sounded pretty sure about that.

Dirk nodded. “I know. But I still go there, anyway. It’s a double edged sword, too. On the one hand questions like that make me better the next time -- maybe it’ll have me memorizing a section of the city roads, or reading up on the latest techniques and procedures. But it weighs heavily, too, thinking that if I’d done something differently – better -- someone who’s dead might still be alive.”

“Huh. Is making yourself crazy like that worth it?”

Dirk was surprised. He’d expected that Wayne of all people would understand. Of course it was also nice to have someone to talk to about this shit who wasn’t going to get that glazed over get me out of here look in his eyes. “Don’t you do that? Even just a little?”

“Not really. I’m a believer in if it’s meant to happen then it’s going to happen. I’m a damn good ranger. I search my heart out and I know what the hell I’m doing. If I can’t find you... well, maybe you weren’t meant to be found.”

“I like your self-confidence.”

“Yeah? Lots of folks think it’s arrogance, but if I’m not convinced that I’m the right guy for this job, then I shouldn’t be doing it -- I should let someone who is right for it do it. I just happen to believe I’m the right guy.”

Dirk couldn’t argue with that.

He sat up suddenly, realizing the sky was starting to lighten, dawn soon painting the sky in fingers of light pink through grey. “Wow, that’s gorgeous.” The lake, the mountains all around them, the trees -- it really was beautiful.

He smiled at Wayne, only to find Wayne smiling softly back, eyes warm. Dirk was drawn to that smile, to Wayne’s face. Almost without thinking he leaned in, his eyes focusing on Wayne’s lips, which Wayne licked, making them shine in the early morning half-light.

Dirk leaned in closer and their noses bumped, making them both pull away a little, laughing. But a few breaths later he was leaning in again, Wayne leaning right on back. This time they each tilted their heads, which had both of them chuckling and a warm gust of Wayne’s breath slid across Dirk’s face. He moaned softly as their lips touched, still both shaped in a smile. Then he moaned again as their tongues met, sliding together as the last of their laughter faded away.

The kiss lasted long enough that he could taste Wayne. There was something earthy about Wayne’s flavor, with a hint of spice. It was nice.

They parted and he stared, watching the way the sky brightened in Wayne's eyes, his pupils contracting as it got brighter and brighter, the rising sun adding heat as well as light to the day.

Wayne smiled and gave him a quick, hard kiss before standing. "I should get you back to Mrs McGaven's. She'll be frantic.

"She's no reason to be," he reminded Wayne. Or right to be, either.

"Maybe not, but it's all part of the package with Mrs. McGaven. She adopts each and every one of her guests."

Shaking his head, Dirk gathered his stuff together. He supposed he couldn't bitch about her attitude too much, after all, he took on responsibility of the lives of the people who came through his ambulance, followed up on them the next day, stuff like that. He considered it an occupational hazard. Maybe it was the same for Mrs. McGaven. Either that or she needed folks to mother now that her kids were grown.

He dug through his pack and found what was left of the cookie bar. Breaking it, he offered half to Wayne, whose eyes lit up as he took it. Obviously Mrs. McGaven's food was known among more than just her guests.

He shouldered his pack, quickly munching his half of the cookie bar, and looked around, realizing he had no clear memory of how he had gotten here. He didn't know which way led back to the path, or even in which direction the rustic Bed and Breakfast could be found. He looked around a second time, more slowly and really concentrating on finding cues.

Wayne suddenly started laughing. "You *are* lost, aren't you?"

He smiled wryly. "I'm sure I'll figure it out eventually."

Still laughing, Wayne headed off toward a spot where the trees became thicker, taller. "Let's forgo eventually and I'll take the lead." Grinning, Wayne led them right through the trees to a red-marked trail.

They hiked through the woods fairly quietly as they followed a red trail. Like back at the lake, the silence was comfortable. Dirk appreciated that. He liked not feeling like he had to fill every moment with chatter or anything else. There didn't need to be something going on all the time.

"Do you like reading?" Dirk asked suddenly as the red trail they were on came out into a meadow and they picked up a green trail, the sun climbing the sky at their backs.

"Huh? Oh. Sure. Especially horrors and mysteries. Why?"

"Just curious." Gerry'd not been against reading or anything, and often had a book on the go, but if they were both home, he expected they'd do things together. Dirk had suggested they both just sit and read once. You'd have thought he'd asked Gerry to stab himself in the hand or something. "What about movies?"

"I like movies. I don't like watching them by myself though -- I like being able to talk about it after I've seen it. Not dissect it exactly... well, maybe some movies." Wayne grinned back at him. "Why? Are you asking me to go out with you?"

Dirk felt his cheeks color from more than just the exertion of hiking. "Maybe. Sort of. Yes."

"Well then maybe I'll sort of accept."

"Yeah?" Dirk moved a little faster, caught up with Wayne. "Are there anything like movie theatres around here?"

"Nah. But you could come over to my place if you wanted. I've got a ton of DVDs: all sorts of movies, television shows, concerts. All sorts."

"That'd be great." Dirk laughed suddenly. "I can't even offer to bring food -- I don't know if there's anything around here I can pick up." Oh, damn, he didn't even have a car -- Mrs. McGaven had picked him up from the bus station. "Actually... I can't really even pick myself up."

"I can pick you up. And I can throw something together so we won't starve."

"Yeah? Thanks. I feel kind of silly, asking you out and then making you deal with everything."

Wayne looked over at him, grinning. "You'll make it up to me."

That look made something in his chest feel a little funny. "Oh I will, will I?"

"Yep. You will." There was that confidence again. Dirk decided he found it pretty sexy.

"Okay, then." He was smiling like a loon, one of those smiles you could feel all the way inside.

They came into view of Mrs. McGaven's cabin and Dirk was almost sorry. Only almost because now that he could see it, his back started hurting, feeling stiff from his night spent out on the beach in the damp. And he was tired. He hadn't had a full night's sleep.

As they got nearer, Mrs. McGaven came rushing out of the house and threw her arms around him, hugging on him. "Oh, I was so worried! I warned you about getting back before dark!"

"I was just fine," he started, but she interrupted him, going on about the woods being treacherous to those who didn't know them and how she'd imagined all sorts of terrible things happening to him. How it was too cold for folks to be camping, though Dirk hadn't really noticed the cold until the sun came up and started warming everything back up again and he'd realized he was cold all through.

Wayne trailed them as she all but hauled him back to the house, and she gave Wayne a hug as well. "Thank you so much for finding him!" She pushed a pan of brownies on him, Wayne accepting them happily and promising to return the pan.

“In fact I could return it tomorrow when I pick you up, Dirk. How’s six sound?”

Blushing under Mrs. McGaven’s eagle eye, Dirk nodded. “That sounds good. I’ll see you then.”

Wayne looked like he wanted to give Dirk a kiss, and Dirk would have liked that, but Mrs. McGaven wasn’t getting any sort of hint that they might want a moment of at least semi-privacy and in the end Wayne smiled and waved and Dirk watched him go, only half-listening as Mrs. McGaven started chattering again.

Chapter Two

Dirk looked glumly at the clothes on his bed and rolled his eyes at himself. He was being silly. Wayne wasn't going to care that he only had jeans and T-shirts or flannel shirts with him. And damn it, he hated guys who looked like they'd just spent the entire day shopping for just the right outfit and primping. He grabbed a clean pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, adding a mostly blue flannel over it, but leaving the buttons undone. He was clean and unwrinkled, teeth and hair brushed, face washed. He figured he was presentable and that would do.

A glance out the window proved he also had perfect timing as a ranger Jeep pulled up in the long driveway. He grinned and headed down the stairs, more than ready to see Wayne again. See if the man looked as good after a good night's sleep as he had out by the lake in the middle of the night.

Mrs. McGaven had already let Wayne in and was busy talking his ear off, and pressing a casserole dish into his hands.

"I've already got supper made," Wayne told her. "But it was a lovely idea, thank you."

"Well take it anyway, honey. In case yours doesn't work out." Dirk had to bite his lip at the way it sounded like she was pretty sure Wayne's efforts *wouldn't* turn out. She really did like to mother people.

He cleared his throat as he came down the last stairs and she turned. "Oh, here's your young man now. I'll leave the porch light on for you, dear."

"Don't call Search and Rescue if he doesn't come home, ma'am."

Wayne's words warmed through him, and Dirk smiled at the man. He met Wayne's eyes, saw the way they were focused on him. Oh yeah. Don't wait up at all, Mrs. McGaven. If he was lucky he wasn't coming back until morning, and he'd say it was looking like he was going to be lucky.

"Oh, but..." her voice faded away as she looked from one to the other of them. And then her mouth snapped shut, a blush coloring her apple cheeks. "Well just make sure you're safe is all I'm saying."

"We will be. Wayne is a park ranger after all." Dirk hustled Wayne outside and to the waiting Jeep. "Sorry," he apologized as he slid into the passenger seat and pull on his belt. "I wanted to get us out of there before she started supplying us with lube and condoms."

Wayne laughed, the sound bright, and Dirk found himself relaxing. It wasn't that he'd forgotten that it was easy to be with Wayne, but he hadn't been sure it would persist once they turned being together into a date rather than a... well, a rescue.

He was given the casserole to hold -- it was still warm -- and Wayne started up the Jeep and off they went, leaving Mrs. McGaven's place behind as they turned a corner and the trees blocked it from view. He had to admit, the casserole smelled good, and his stomach rumbled.

"I've got stew on the stove at home," Wayne told him with a grin. "All I need to do is throw in the dumplings and let them cook."

"You really can cook!" And that sounded better than Mrs. McGaven's casserole smelled, which was saying something. And the fact that he was attracted to Wayne wasn't coloring his opinion on that. Right.

"Nothing fancy, but I can do stuff that'll stick to your ribs. In a good way." They met a paved road and Wayne turned right on it. "I pulled out a few of my favorite movies, too. We don't have to watch them -- you could go through my collection and choose whatever you want."

"Well what ones did you pull out?"

"Predator, Aliens -- all of them although the first one is the best. Still sometimes it's nice to have a little marathon. The Lords of Dogtown and GleamingtheCube." Wayne added the last one quickly, face picking up a bit of color.

"Gleaming the Cube?" The name sounded familiar, but Dirk couldn't quite place it.

"Skateboard film with um... a really young Christian Slater. I was so hot for the guy growing up." Wayne shot him a wry grin. "I think it's why I like Lords of Dogtown so much. Misspent youth, though not in the standard way."

Dirk laughed, watching the trees fly by. Wayne didn't seem to be put off by the bumps and potholes in the road. "For me it was Keanu Reeves."

"No shit? Hey, at least my teenage crush could act."

"I wasn't watching him for his acting ability," Dirk replied dryly.

"No, I imagine you weren't." They slowed down and Wayne turned the Jeep into a long laneway. "They both grew older pretty good, too."

"Yeah, I wouldn't throw either of them out of bed for eating crackers..."

"Unless it was to do them on the floor," they finished together, laughing.

Wayne had a really great smile. Dirk was distracted from it as they pulled to a stop in front of a cabin that was smaller than Mrs. McGaven's, and even more rustic-looking. For a brief moment Dirk wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

Wayne must have read it in his face. "Hot and cold running water, electricity and indoor plumbing. Not to mention satellite and internet. I might be a Park Ranger, but trust me, I'm into being pampered when I'm on my down time."

His cheeks went a little red. "Sounds good. And sorry -- I didn't mean to disparage your place."

“S’okay. You’re forgiven... if you pick Gleaming the Cube as our after dinner movie.”

“Deal.”

The place smelled even better than the casserole they’d been given and he handed it over to Wayne, grinning as it was thrown into the freezer. “I’ll be more than happy for it at some point. But tonight I want to wow you with my prowess in the kitchen.”

“You have prowess?” He teased, looking around the homey cabin. The wood theme started with the walls and was carried out through the furniture. Splashes of red with the couch cushions and the curtains. The electronics -- a huge plasma television with a surround-sound system and a nice CD set-up -- looked like they’d been dropped in out of the blue, not really matching the rustic décor. There were pots and urns here and there on top of bookcases and tables, some made out of clay, others glass or stoneware.

“I do have prowess. And if you’re lucky, I’ll show you later.” Wayne gave him a wink.

It turned out that Wayne did indeed have prowess, in the kitchen at least. The bowl of stew with the best dumplings Dirk had ever had tasted as good as it smelled. He had two bowls and three slices of the crusty bread that Wayne pulled out of the oven. He finished off his last piece of bread, the butter all melted and dripping on his fingers, and sat back with a groan, patting his belly.

“If you’ve got homemade dessert, too, I just might have to marry you.”

Wayne headed over to the fridge and pulled a tub of ice cream out of the freezer, and then brought it and a pan of brownies, still warm, over to the table. “Do I get a ring?”

His stomach was pretty full, but he knew he’d find some room for the warm brownies and ice cream. The ice cream was the good stuff, too, not a cheap store brand. “It depends -- are those brownies from a mix?”

“Nope. My Gram’s recipe.”

“Then you better believe you get a ring.” Dirk grinned, and then laughed as his stomach growled in anticipation.

“You’re a bottomless pit.” Wayne cut generous portions of brownie and stuck them on two plates.

“Nah, the food is just inspiring.”

The brownies had the ice cream soft and melting, and the flavors were amazing together in his mouth. Dirk knew he was making the most embarrassing groaning noises, but he just couldn’t seem to stop himself. And frankly, he didn’t really care.

He’d finished the last bite and was contemplating how rude it would be if he licked the last of the crumbs and melted ice cream from the bowl when he realized that Wayne was staring. “What?”

he asked, feeling the heat start to crawl up his cheeks; surely his intent hadn't been written across his face. Though maybe it had.

Grinning, Wayne shook his head. "You enjoyed that. A lot." At his nod Wayne shrugged. "Well, I was enjoying you enjoy it."

Dirk felt self-conscious about it for about two seconds, but the look in Wayne's eyes was definitely appreciative so he figured he didn't need to be embarrassed. "Would it be rude if I licked out the bowl?"

A soft noise that might have been a groan escaped from Wayne. "Maybe. Do it anyway."

"Thanks. It's just really yummy." Dirk brought the bowl up to his mouth and licked it clean, loving the way the tiny brownie crumbs and the melted ice cream tasted together. With a contented sigh, he put down his bowl and sat back. "That was awesome. I might explode -- but it'll be a happy explosion."

Wayne chuckled distractedly, eyes on... well on his nose maybe.

"What?" he asked again.

"You've got..." leaning over, Watt's licked the tip of his nose and then the corner of his lips, tongue soft and hot and sending a wave of heat down to his cock. "You had cream. On your nose. And the corner of your mouth."

"Are you sure you got it all?" Dirk asked. He was looking into Wayne's eyes, so he saw the way his words made them flare.

"No. No, I'm not." Leaning over again, Wayne slid his tongue across Dirk's upper lip, and then his lower one. The tip of Wayne's tongue teased the corner of his mouth, pushing in a little. "That's better."

"Better than what?" he asked a little breathlessly.

"Huh? Oh." Wayne shook himself and stood. "Better than not doing it," he said with a grin, and then started to clear the table, piling the plates on top of each other and bringing them over to the dishwasher.

Dirk ignored his growing hard-on and got up to help clear up. Every now and then, as he and Wayne moved around the little kitchen, their bodies would brush. The first couple of times Dirk thought it was just a coincidence -- the results of two grown men working in a small kitchen -- but after the third or fourth touch, the last one more a rub of Wayne's crotch against his thigh, Dirk realized Wayne was doing it on purpose.

"You're not making it easy to clear up."

"I'm not trying to make it easy to clear up. I'm trying to make it fun."

Dirk sidled closer to Wayne. “You’re succeeding then. I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun cleaning up after a meal.”

“Seriously?” Wayne asked, beginning to wash the three items he’d deemed ‘not dishwasher safe’.

“Why is that so strange?”

“I don’t know.” Wayne shrugged. “Cleaning and cooking were as much a part of sharing a meal as eating it was when I was growing up. It still is really, for me. It should be fun if you’re doing it with someone you like.”

“Kind of like foreplay?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Dirk started laughing, tickled by the notion that doing dishes was like foreplay. On the other hand, if more people thought like that there’d be a lot more clean dishes and happy couples, he bet. “I like it,” he said when his chuckles finally died off.

He put the milk in the fridge and wiped down the counter, done about the same time Wayne turned off the taps and wiped his hands dry on a dish towel. He guessed if this had been foreplay, it was okay that he was hard and anticipating sharing the red couch with Wayne.

“You want a coffee or something? I’ve got hot chocolate we could spike.”

He’d been about to say no to the coffee, but changed his mind when Wayne suggested the chocolate. “That sounds great,” he admitted. “What can I do to help?”

“Why don’t you go in to the living room and set up a movie for us.”

“I can do that. Which movie do you want to watch?”

“You promised me Gleaming the Cube.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

Dirk spent a few minutes perusing the bookcase full of movies, checking the titles out on the spine. It was an eclectic collection, and Dirk had a feeling they were sorted a certain way, but he couldn’t figure it out. It wasn’t alphabetical, or by type. In the end he went to the movies Wayne had pulled out and left on the coffee table. He picked up Gleaming the Cube and grinned. It was a make-out movie if anything was. And seeing as they’d been indulging in foreplay in the kitchen... he was kind of glad he’d agreed to it.

He grabbed the remote and figured out how to turn on the television. The DVD player took a little longer, mainly because he couldn’t actually find it until he realized it was built right into the TV. Then he loaded up the movie and hit menu to skip all the stupid movie ads.

He contemplated the couch, trying to decide where to sit. If he sat in the middle, Wayne could sit to the left or right of him, whichever was more comfortable for Wayne. But if he sat in the middle it would indicate he was expecting them to sit close. Which of course he was. In fact he was hoping there'd be a lot more than just sitting going on and really, he was acting like a teenager in high school and he had to get over himself.

The middle it was.

Of course before he'd even sat Wayne came strolling out of the kitchen and handed him a steaming mug of hot chocolate that had a hint of something minty in it.

"Crème de menthe," Wayne said, sitting on the right side of the couch, quite near the middle, and patting the cushions next to him. "Come sit."

So Dirk did, leaving a scant few inches between them that Wayne soon took care of, shifting so their thighs were pressed up together. All Dirk had to do was put his arm around Wayne's shoulder, and Wayne leaned against his side, warm and good, and smelling a little like cologne, but a lot like man.

Wayne leaned forward to snag the remote off the table and then settled back against him, even closer this time. "You good?"

At his nod, Wayne pressed the play button.

The hot chocolate was good -- chocolate with only a hint of the mint and alcohol. Dirk drank his up rather quickly once it was cool enough not to burn his tongue. He wasn't really paying attention to the movie either, to be honest. He was rather distracted by how good Wayne felt leaning against him, and by contemplating how soon he could make a move.

He needn't have worried about that, because he'd no sooner put his mug down on the table, when Wayne's joined it. Then his face was taken in Wayne's hands. "I hope this is okay. I've been wanting to do it all day." Then their lips were moving together, the kiss almost chaste for a moment before Wayne's mouth opened and his tongue painted Dirk's lips.

Dirk's lips parted with a gasp, which seemed to be all the invitation Wayne needed, that tongue pushing right into Dirk's mouth and making him moan. Dirk's hands slid over Wayne's back, rubbing and feeling, heading very slowly southward.

"God, you're going to think I'm the worst kind of slut, but..." Wayne grabbed his hand and dragged it down to the man's ass. "I don't see any reason to be coy."

Dirk shook his head. "No, no reason at all."

Then they were kissing again, and he could taste the chocolate in Wayne's mouth, a hint of the mint, and something else beneath that. He swept his tongue through Wayne's mouth again and again, searching for the underlying flavor that he thought was probably Wayne himself.

He squeezed the ass cheek in his hand, eliciting a groan from Wayne, along with a wiggle and before he knew it, Wayne had thrown a leg over his thighs and was straddling him. The kiss changed, became deeper, Wayne's mouth devouring his. And Wayne's fingers slid to his shirt, working at the buttons and sliding over his skin.

Dirk wasn't used to his lover being the aggressor -- he usually took the driver's seat. He had to admit, he liked this. He liked it a lot. His cock throbbed in his jeans, pushing hard against his zipper. It pushed even harder as Wayne's fingers danced across his right nipple, the touches light and then a little harder, making his skin pebble up like it was trying to keep Wayne's attention.

He groaned as Wayne's fingers grabbed hold and tugged; it felt like there was a live wire stretched between his nipple and his cock, and Wayne was activating it every time he tugged. Legs shifting restlessly, Dirk bucked up, his own hands opening and closing around Wayne's ass. He realized Wayne was as hard as he was, and he started rolling their hips together, making their cocks rub. It would have been better naked, but it was already pretty damned good and his hands were a little occupied. Wayne kept the kisses going, even when Dirk lost his focus, all he had to do was follow Wayne's lead.

"Shirt," murmured Wayne, licking at his lips, fingers sliding the flannel over his shoulders and tugging up his T-shirt.

"Yours, too," he said, pulling his arms out of the sleeves, and letting Wayne push the T-shirt over his head. His own fingers moved to slide Wayne's buttons out of the holes. They gave easily and they were soon chest to chest, skin sliding. Dirk gasped as his nipples rubbed on Wayne's skin, sparking that live wire some more and making him buck.

"Yeah, good idea -- pants next." Wayne's fingers were right there, tugging open his belt and then working his button and zipper.

Dirk's cock found the hole in his boxers and pushed right out into Wayne's waiting hand, making them both chuckle and Dirk wrapped his hand around the back of Wayne's neck, tugging him in for another kiss. God, he couldn't remember the last time it was this good this fast, the last time he needed so hard.

Wayne's hand wrapped around his cock, fingers tight as they slid up over the head and then back down along the shaft again. Dirk bucked helplessly, making noises, his hands opening and closing on Wayne's neck.

"I want you to come," murmured Wayne, jacking him harder. "And then I want to have you." A shudder moved through Dirk at the words and Wayne grinned a little wildly. "You like that idea."

There was no denying that, he was leaking all over Wayne's hand, the head of his cock swelling as he got closer. He nodded yes, and arched again, his hole clenching. He'd done it before, once or twice a long time ago, but most of the men he'd been with had been catchers to his pitcher. It was kind of exciting being on the other end.

"We can do it the other way around next time."

And oh, fuck, they hadn't even finished this time and Wayne wanted a next time. Dirk panted and nodded, his hips moving with Wayne's hand, sending his cock sailing through the tunnel made by Wayne's palm and fingers. The man had good hands. Make that great hands, he thought as Wayne's thumb and forefinger squeezed just below his head.

"Wayne..." He banged his head against the couch a couple of times, trying to hold on, his fingers squeezing Wayne's shoulders, probably leaving bruises.

"Come on, sexy. Show me what you've got."

Sexy. Dirk bucked hard, coming all over himself and Wayne's hand, the hot liquid cooling on his skin before he'd even finished shuddering and shivering.

He lay back against the couch, panting, lazily watching Wayne grin a shit-eating grin. "You look pretty pleased with yourself."

"Yep. You need a few minutes or are you ready for me to have my turn?"

Smiling, Dirk reached up and stroked Wayne's cheek. Then he let his hand slide down over Wayne's chest and down to cup the impressive bulge caught inside blue jeans. "You really willing to wait?" he asked, squeezing a bit.

Wayne jerked. "If I have to," he managed. And that was about the nicest thing anyone had done for Dirk in a long time. Certainly the most thoughtful.

Dirk pulled Wayne to him and initiated a kiss, his hand squeezing Wayne's cock a few times. At least until Wayne's hand landed on top of his and stopped him. "I want to be inside you, Dirk. Not still in my pants."

"Yeah, I'd like that. Been awhile though," he admitted.

"I'll be gentle." Wayne's eyes twinkled at him and Dirk mock-punched the guy in the arm.

"I won't break." Still he'd mentioned it, hadn't he?

Wayne stroked his face. "I know."

Standing, Wayne held out a hand for him, helped him up and led him to the bedroom. Their conversation and the move had slowed things down a little, made them less urgent and they went back to kissing by the bed, he and Wayne slowly getting the rest of their clothes off.

Wayne's prick was big, long and thick, especially right around the head. It was pretty and Dirk couldn't help but reach for it, wrapping his hand around the heated flesh. He pumped once, just to see, and then let go, his fingers moving over the silky skin, exploring the shape of it, feeling the bumps and ridges beneath the surface, the long vein along the underside.

"You like?" Wayne asked.

“Yeah. Pretty.” His cock was at half mast, taking an interest in his explorations.

Wayne’s fingers brushed over his nipples, just lightly, making him gasp. “You still want it in you?”

His cock jerked at the words, finishing the job of going hard. “I do, Wayne. I want you to do me.”

“Then you’d better stop touching and let me get you ready.” Wayne touched his cheek. “I’m kind of ready to go off and if you keep playing...”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” He nodded and let go of Wayne’s cock, and then turned and leaned over the bed, spreading his legs a little. “This okay?” he asked, turning his head to look when Wayne made a strangled noise.

Wayne was licking his lips and staring at Dirk’s ass. When Dirk cleared his throat, Wayne shook himself and gave Dirk an eager grin. “It’ll do.” Grinning at him, Wayne opened the top drawer of his dresser and rummaged around. “I’ve got stuff.” Which was good, because Dirk didn’t. He hadn’t even thought about it. Not that thinking about it would have done him much good -- he hadn’t brought anything with him and it wasn’t exactly the kind of thing he was going to ask Mrs. McGaven about. Just that thought made him shudder, and not in a good way.

Wayne’s hand on the small of his back helped counter the thought, though. It was hot, he could feel each of Wayne’s fingers against his skin, and he knew what was coming, his body tightening in anticipation.

“Nice ass,” Wayne told him, and Dirk grinned, tightening his gluts a few times, making Wayne laugh softly.

The laughter faded though, as did Dirk’s fooling around, as Wayne’s fingers slid along his crack, really slippery and slightly cool from the slick. Dirk blew out his breath and put his head on the bed, telling himself to relax. He didn’t tighten up when Wayne’s fingers brushed over his hole, in fact he bore down on them as soon as two stopped against him and pushed in a little.

“Oh, fuck, you’re tight.” Wayne pushed his fingers in a little deeper, and started pushing them in and out, just little movements, letting Dirk get used the sensations inside him. It felt amazing, skin and nerves that were rarely stimulated responding to the touches and making Dirk shiver.

“More,” he begged. The touches were sweet and gentle and good, but not nearly enough.

Wayne pushed his fingers in deeper in response, and spread them. The burn made Dirk groan. “Don’t stop,” he gasped.

“I’m not going to tease you,” Wayne assured him. “I want this too badly.” Dirk could feel the truth of those words in the hard, wet-tipped cock that slid against the back of his thighs. It pushed against him again and again as Wayne finger-fucked him, the man’s body rocking against him with every push in. Dirk moved with it as well, pushing back onto Wayne’s fingers.

They just hung there for a bit, Dirk closing his eyes and concentrating on the feeling of it, on the way it made his balls start to ache, his cock rubbing against the bed. Then Wayne twisted his fingers a little and hit Dirk's prostate, making him buck and groan.

"Oh, there we go," murmured Wayne, fingers hitting it again.

Each time Wayne pushed against it, Dirk bucked, jerked and moaned until he finally had to stop Wayne. "Come on, man. Enough. You're going to make me go off again."

Wayne's fingers disappeared immediately at his words, and Dirk spread his legs, pushing his ass back like a slut. He wanted it, he wanted it so bad. "Come on, Wayne."

"Easy. Just gotta glove up." Wayne's hands slid over his ass and spread his cheeks, fingers digging into his skin as the blunt, hot head of Wayne's prick pressed against his hole.

Dirk nodded and took a couple of breaths, ass pushing back eagerly. "Come on," he whispered again.

And then Wayne sank slowly into him, stretching him so fucking wide. Dirk moaned, the sound pulled up from deep inside him. His hands fisted into the sheets, muscles clenching and releasing.

Wayne stilled. "You okay?"

"Yes! Don't stop. Come on, man." He was going to have to kill Wayne if the guy stopped again. "Just do it!"

"Okay." Wayne's hands wrapped around his hips as Wayne pulled out. Dirk groaned, squeezing tight around Wayne's prick, feeling the drag as it slid out. Then he relaxed and Wayne pushed back in, filling him up again. Oh yeah, that was it.

"More," Dirk whispered, body moving to find Wayne's rhythm, to meet each thrust.

They soon had it working, their bodies coming together nice and easy for a dozen strokes or so. It was driving Dirk mad, but any more force and Wayne would have him coming. It seemed that Wayne felt the same way because all of a sudden his fingers tightened on Dirk's hips.

"Sorry. Gotta. Need to." The words were bitten off, but Dirk understood. He felt it, too. Wayne moved faster, harder, slamming into him as Wayne reached for his orgasm. Dirk wrapped his own hand around his cock, letting Wayne's thrusts push it through the tunnel of his hand.

Better and better, each thrust made him think that was going to be the last one before he came, but it just kept getting better. Then suddenly he was coming, gasping, his eyes flying wide open to stare sightlessly across Wayne's bed. A few jerks and shudders later and Wayne collapsed down onto him, panting against his spine.

"Mmm..." Dirk managed by way of thank you and wow, and oh, yeah, that was good.

“Mrgrf.” Wayne was even less verbal.

It made him chuckle, which shifted Wayne’s cock inside him, and that had him moaning. He wasn’t going to get it up again, but wow, those aftershocks felt good, sort of zinging up his spine and making his cock throb.

There was always a moment where fucking like crazy while bent over the bed or the chair or the table or whatever found you suddenly uncomfortable and sticky and usually sore in odd places. Not that the fucking wasn’t worth it, but that moment always came when it was enough and you needed a bed for your bones. Dirk grunted when it suddenly hit him that he was uncomfortable and Wayne was still in him, softening up and the condom there and ew. Happily, Wayne understood the grunt for what it was and he carefully slipped out, one hand sliding along Dirk’s side.

Dirk crawled up onto the bed and was joined a moment later by Wayne, who’d brought a warm washcloth and quickly wiped him down. “Oh, that’s nice.” He couldn’t remember the last time someone’d done more than throw a tissue or two at him.

Wayne gave him a soft, goofy grin and then tugged the covers up over them. “Yeah, the one sweet thing I do before I roll over and go to sleep.”

Dirk chuckled, and then chuckled harder when Wayne wrapped an arm around his waist, and, head on his shoulder, fell asleep. Complete with soft little snores that weren’t really loud enough to be a bother. In fact Dirk kind of liked them, and he fell asleep himself, warm and held, the sound of Wayne’s breathing fading into a dream.

An alarm woke Dirk up, had him sitting up straight out of a deep sleep and for a moment he wasn’t sure where he was and he certainly didn’t know what was going on. Then Wayne popped up next to him and hightailed it out of bed, grabbing a pair of boxers on his way out.

“That’s the Search and Rescue Alarm. Someone must be lost.” Wayne disappeared out the door and a moment later the horrible noise stopped.

Dirk breathed a sigh of relief. Well, now he could think. It only took him a moment to locate his underwear and jeans, and to remember that his shirts were out in the living room. By the time he had his pants on and was working on his socks, Wayne was back, quickly adding uniform pants and shirt to the underwear he wore.

“Someone was idiot enough to be out climbing the rock face on Mt. Swans after nightfall. At least they were smart enough to bring along a cell phone with a GPS locator, so when they fell and broke their leg, they were able to call it in and we’ll be able to find them easily. We’re the closest rescue unit and I told them I had a paramedic with me.” Wayne looked up from tying the laces on his Kodiaks. “I hope that’s okay, but this guy might have hurt more than just his leg and he could be bleeding out and time’s of the essence.”

Dirk blinked, still trying to get his brain out of sleep mode. “Yeah, that’s fine. I don’t have my bag with me or anything, though. And I’ve never climbed before.”

Wayne shook his head and tossed Dirk a heavy sweater to go over his shirt. “We’ve got a fairly extensive first aid kit and from what I understand this idiot fell down into the ravine. We’ll approach it from the south and walk right in on ground level.”

It turned out it wasn’t quite as easy as Wayne had predicted, but they’d been able to drive in to about a half a mile from where they needed to be and hiked the rest of the way in. Dirk found the hiking actually pretty easy, even though the terrain was rough, because the adrenaline was pumping, the familiar surge as he sped to save someone’s life. He wore the first aid kit on his back, the bag surprisingly heavy, but the straps were well-padded and designed to be worn by someone who had to climb a fair distance. Wayne wore a similar pack filled with rope and other climbing equipment, water, food bars, and a couple of changes of clothes.

They both carried walkie-talkies, Wayne having given him a quick lesson in using it before they went. It and the Bowie knife Wayne had loaned him felt strange on his belt, foreign. His radio was usually on his shoulder, and the only knives they used were scalpels; clothes were cut away with surgical scissors. Wayne had deemed it necessary though, in case they got separated or came across a bear. Dirk was pretty sure if he “came across” a bear he wasn’t going to need the knife because he was going to be running as fast as he could.

The last twenty yards or so were the hardest, Wayne cursing every time the terrain forced them to backtrack. What made it worse was that their rescue wasn’t responding to them. They knew he was just ahead, but call as they did, it was in vain. Dirk just hoped the guy had only passed out and wasn’t dead. He really didn’t want to be associating making love to Wayne with arriving too late to save someone.

They nearly tripped over the guy when they finally found him. As it was Dirk barreled up into Wayne’s back, the two of them managing, just, to stay upright.

As soon as he saw the patient though, Dirk was all business. Wayne held a flashlight and called it in, while Dirk examined the patient. The guy had a broken leg all right, and some bad bruising around his ribs. It felt like several were broken. “He’s not going to be able to walk out of here,” he told Wayne. “And I’m pretty sure if we carry him out, we’re going to damage these ribs.”

Wayne relayed the information to headquarters who assured them the rescue helicopter from Thompson had gone airborne about ten minutes ago and would be there soon.

“It’ll have to do.” Dirk figured they’d be okay. Their patient’s breathing and heartbeat were solid; he’d even stirred once or twice when Dirk had slapped his cheeks.

He and Wayne worked together to get a line in, and make the patient as comfortable as possible and then they settled in to wait.

They heard the copter long before they saw it, the noise of it even waking their patient. “Hey!” Dirk shouted.

“Hey,” the guy said back. “I was hoping you guys would get here.”

“What’s your name, man?”

“Jim. James Beldeer.”

“Okay, Mr. Beldeer, I’m a paramedic. My name is Dirk, okay?” He waited for Jim to nod before continuing. “You’ve got a badly broken leg and several broken ribs. The helicopter is sending down a basket. You just lie still in it and don’t look over the sides, okay?”

“Okay.”

He wasn’t sure Jim was actually understanding much of what he was saying, the guy was probably in major shock; Dirk hadn’t given him anything for the pain and Jim had to be hurting pretty good.

Wayne touched him on the shoulder and he helped the ranger grab the basket as it came down. There was a backboard in it and they got the collar on Jim and then Jim onto the backboard before loading it into the basket. There were clips to hold it in place, as well as restraints to keep the patient from rolling out. In fact the whole thing could flip and Jim wouldn’t go anywhere. He decided not to tell Jim that -- the last thing you wanted to hear was the word “flip” when you were about to be lifted up into the air in a basket.

He and Wayne watched the basket slowly get higher and higher, and then it disappeared altogether, the noise of the helicopter fading away to nothing. Wayne patted him on the back. “Well done, Dirk. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

“He’d have been okay -- as long as those ribs stayed still.”

“Did you like it?” Wayne asked.

Dirk thought about it, about the differences between this and working an ambulance in the city. It was kind of weird doing it without the bus, but not bad different. “Yeah, it was good being able to help save someone.” He didn’t think he was ready yet for watching someone else die in his care. He’d get there, but he’d come away on holiday for a reason.

Wayne started packing their backpacks up. “They’re advertising for a paramedic,” Wayne said casually. “Someone who could go out with Search and Rescue and who could be available for emergencies for the locals. You’d basically be on call 24/7, but the pay’s really good and there’d be a lot of downtime in between.”

“Oh yeah?”

Wayne gave him a warm smile. “Yeah. And lodging’s provided. Either on your own, or, you know, shared with another ranger...”

Dirk grinned. Well it looked like he already had one item in the pro column. “I’ll think about it.”

“Cool.” Wayne smiled and then started off, leading the way back out to the jeep. And, grinning, Dirk followed.

Dirk glanced up and caught sight of the sky through the trees, the stars shining brightly. He thought he saw one twinkling and his smile grew. It was a beautiful night.

Epilogue

Dirk washed the mud off the Jeep, using a cloth and soapy water to get the particularly stubborn dirt off. Once it was shiny, he rolled the hose up and set it on the hook by the tap so it would be ready for next time. Then he went through his first aid bag, restocking and making sure all the items that had been used were replaced. The rescue bag was next: ropes, batteries, water and emergency food supplies all refreshed and packed to take up the least amount of room. He sealed them up and put the date on the tag with a Sharpie.

The sun was just starting to set -- they'd been lucky, getting the call in early in the morning and finding the climber while it was still light. Night searches had a higher incidence of bad endings. Still, most of the endings were good ones, and Dirk didn't have to deal with the bad ones on his own.

Done with the job, he headed in to see how his partner was doing with the paperwork. He grinned as he pulled his muddy Kodiaks off. He loved it when it was his turn to deal with the Jeep and the equipment while Wayne handled the paperwork; they traded off, so he only had to sign on the dotted line this time.

"Aren't you done yet?" he asked as he headed for the stove and the bowl of chili that was simmering and making the place smell just amazing. He stirred it a few times, breathing in deeply.

"You watch it or I won't make the cornbread," Wayne threatened. It was an idle threat though; Dirk knew how to make it now -- it was one of the first things Wayne had taught him in the kitchen. While they still happily accepted casseroles and dessert -- especially dessert -- from Mrs. McGaven and other locals, they did pretty well for themselves in the food department.

He went over and looped his arms around Wayne's neck, resting his head on Wayne's shoulder. "Oh, you're almost done!"

"Yep." Wayne turned his head and gave him a kiss. "I'll just need your John Hancock in a few spots and we can throw it in the fax machine. Wayne grinned. "The chili'll keep 'til forever." Which was why it had been left on low when they'd been called out. "And the cornbread doesn't have to go on until we're ready to eat..."

"So what you're saying is..." Dirk straightened up. "First one to the bed gets to top?"

He was off before he'd finished the sentence, Wayne shouting "cheat!" as he hit the threshold to the living room. But Dirk slowed down as he heard Wayne coming.

Sometimes it was good to be caught.

End.

From the Heavens

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Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press, Inc.: Single Shot electronic edition / January 2007

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680