First Elegy

by Mice

Summary

Carson and Rodney are having a rough recovery.

Notes

Thanks to Abylity for Rodney-beta. More thanks to Ladyhawk for the medical beta bits. Non-gratuitous Gaelic warning for the squeamish. It's part of the plot, honest.

See the end of the work for more notes

For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure

~~Rainer Maria Rilke, from Duino Elegies, The First Elegy, trans. Stephen Mitchell~~

Sheppard sat next to McKay as Dr. Bentz worked, her concern obvious in the fast efficiency of her motions. McKay was hooked up to a respirator and still looked faintly blue around the lips. Rodney wasn't out of the woods yet.

Beckett wasn't in good shape, either. He'd taken a really ugly blow to the head at some point, and while he'd obviously been together enough to save Rodney's life, he'd been extremely disoriented and puking sick when he'd initially come around in the Jumper. Michelle Tuchman, the RN who usually assisted him, was really worried about him. She'd had no idea how he'd managed to get as far as he did in his condition, much less dragging McKay part of the way. Apparently, that he'd managed to be on his feet at all was close to miraculous. It seemed that Beckett was made of stronger stuff than anybody had suspected.
Between McKay's anaphylaxis, Beckett's concussion and fractured skull, and the burns and smoke inhalation they'd both suffered, it would be a while before either of them were on their feet again. Tuchman had assured him that McKay would make a full recovery, but that it would be about a week before he was anything like himself again.

He'd always thought McKay was exaggerating when he talked about being allergic. He'd never believed the man might actually die from something he ate. He'd come far too close. Ford had done CPR on McKay on the Jumper. McKay's body had entirely shut down. Beckett had had nothing to work with, stranded in the fire. The weird little hollow plant tube he'd shoved down McKay's throat had been the only thing keeping him alive.

Beckett, in his own quiet way, was just as brilliant as McKay. He'd almost lost them both.

"He'll be all right, Major," Bentz reassured him. "He's still having some difficulty breathing on his own, but he's getting enough oxygen. We've got his blood pressure stabilized, though it's still lower than I'd like to see. His color's improving and the hives are starting to go down. The smoke inhalation was bad, but you got them here in time."

The mission had been a disaster, start to finish. He reached out and put a hand on McKay's arm now that Bentz had finished with him. It helped calm him, knowing his lead scientist and teammate was still with him. "What about the burns?"

"Mostly minor. First and second degree burns on both of them, but they're small. I assure you, we're no longer in immediate danger of losing Dr. McKay."

"And Beckett?"

"Touch and go." She sighed, and he could feel her unease. "He should be out of surgery soon. They had to relieve some pressure on his brain from blood pooling under the fracture. He's still in very guarded condition." Her dark brown eyes showed exhaustion, and she leaned against McKay's bed with one hip as she spoke. "Shel will keep a close eye on him tonight. We're concerned, but the scans didn't show any serious brain damage. I think he'll be all right, though recovery from this can be slow."

"Thanks, Carol." He relaxed a little.

"Major?"

"Yeah?"

"You need to rest too." Bentz patted his shoulder, a small, tired smile on her lovely cafe-au-lait face. He wondered briefly if she was seeing anyone, but decided he was too exhausted to even think about it right now.

"Right, doc. I'll see you in the morning."

Back in his quarters, Sheppard reviewed the mission for the umpteenth time. He'd already debriefed with Weir and the others.

Utter failure.

He hated missions like that. They'd been sent to Tannaz with Beckett and a bunch of medical supplies to help the Tannazin with an epidemic. Tannaz was a relatively primitive planet, but they'd had food enough to trade in the past month or so, and had become allies of a sort. The Tannazin were forest people, living in houses suspended in the trees. It was like some Star Wars fantasy, but
without the stupid Ewoks.

Their villages were a couple of hours hike from the nearest clearing, and so they'd had to land the Jumper and go in on foot. There'd been very hot, dry weather recently, and the epidemic had come upon them suddenly.

Unfortunately, the hot, dry weather had also led to a series of heat-lightning strikes, and the forest had gone up like jet fuel. He'd heard an hour or so ago that the Tannazin had lost three entire villages to the fire -- a heartbreaking tragedy. The Gate team had been separated by an immense, blazing tree that crashed down in their midst. They were lucky they weren't all dead.

Some days, he hated his job. His thoughts turned to Beckett as he slipped between his sheets. He hoped the doc would be all right. Everyone was worried about him -- even more than they'd been worried about McKay. When they'd found him, one side of his face had been a massive, mangled bruise.

He knew it would be hours before he could sleep.

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Carson's eyes opened slowly. The light was too bright, and his head ached obscenely. Everything else did too, come to think of it. Squinting against it, he looked around. It was all very familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Doctor Beckett."

He turned his head a little. That was a mistake. A sudden wave of nausea overwhelmed him and he panted for a moment, trying to settle it. "Shel." He was in the infirmary. He wasn't sure why, or how he'd gotten there. God, his head was throbbing.

"How do you feel, Carson?" He just groaned and closed his eyes. He felt a cool hand on his cheek. "You're going to be all right."

"Wha' ha...?" His throat burned, but he couldn't remember why that would be. It must have been something awful. His voice sounded small and thready. He felt weaker than a dying kitten.

"Do you remember going to Tannaz?" Shel took his hand and sat on the bed next to him.

Tannaz. That sounded -- "Aye." Tannaz. The fire. He looked at her. "Rodney -- he --"

"He'll be fine, Carson. You saved his life. You asked about him when you came around the first couple of times."

"Mm." It was all he could manage for an answer, despite his intense relief. He couldn't remember being conscious before, only Rodney, dying as the forest burned around them.

"You have a severe concussion and a skull fracture. We had to do some surgery, but there's no permanent damage and the swelling around your eye has gone down considerably. I have no idea how you managed what you did, but everyone's very proud of you."

"Others?" It was a horrible effort, just trying to get one word out at a time. He was slipping back under again and he knew it.

"The rest of the Gate team is fine. Just rest."
At least the darkness was peaceful.

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Shel Tuchman did her rounds through the night, looking in every so often on Carson and Dr. McKay. She wasn't sure which of them worried her more, though she liked Carson far better. He was a kind, pleasant man, witty and charming in a shy way, and a good one to work for. He was always so sweet to her, even on the bad days when everyone was indulging their tendency to snap necks.

McKay was usually annoying and, while she knew he had genuine medical problems, he tended to exaggerate everything in some twisted bid for attention. The man obviously believed he was the center of the universe. His sense of humor, in her opinion, was his saving grace. He could be a sharp-tongued bastard without even thinking about it, but he also had a capacity to make people laugh that made her slightly less eager to take a baseball bat to him.

She leaned against the wall next to Carson's bed, looking down at him as he slept fitfully. The monitors beeped and hummed exactly as they should. His head was bandaged from the surgery, and his face was battered and badly bruised. So was the rest of him, from what she'd seen when they prepped him for surgery. It hurt to see him like this. A sweet guy like Carson shouldn't get hurt. There was a cosmic wrongness to it that rankled her.

Shel wondered, not for the first time, if he had anybody at home. Not that he'd ever mentioned anyone -- but it really wouldn't do to get involved with the boss anyway. Lousy idea, even if he was kind of cute. She sighed and moved along to check on Dr. McKay.

The guy was a world-class asshole. He treated every woman she'd ever talked to like some dippy bimbo from hell. Logically, she could only think of two possible reasons for this. A: he honestly had no clue that he was a world-class asshole and that he offended women right and left. B: he was queer as a three-dollar bill and just never considered that he was being offensive. Shel couldn't quite wrap her brain around somebody being that way deliberately. She was leaning toward A at the moment. Word was he had some kind of fixation on Colonel Carter back at the SGC. Poor Carter. She shook her head.

McKay's breathing was still a little ragged, but that was only to be expected. He was doing very well, considering, and they'd moved him from the respirator to a cannula just before the night shift started. The smoke inhalation had only complicated the anaphylaxis and it would be a couple of days before he was up to much. At least he'd be quiet.

As she watched, his eyes fluttered open.

"Dr. McKay?" She moved closer, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Unnh."

"Would you like some ice?"

He nodded. His throat was undoubtedly very painful after everything he'd been through. She got some chips and raised the head of his bed a bit more so he would be able to breathe and swallow reasonably easily. His skin was still very pale, and there were deep purple arcs under his eyes. He looked half dead. He took the offered chip and sucked for a moment.

"Thanks." His voice was harsh and it hurt to listen to him.

"How are you feeling?"
He blinked at her. "How d'you... think?" The expression on his face wasn't quite a scowl, though he managed to project his opinion that she was terminally stupid. She cut him a little more slack than usual because she knew he was feeling miserable.

"How... Cars..." There was worry in his eyes and his body tensed.

"Dr. Beckett's asleep. He's doing better." Interesting that McKay would ask after someone else rather than bitch about his own condition. Then again, nobody had any real idea what had happened to them, either. It wasn't like either of them had been in any condition to give a report.

McKay nodded and relaxed. He looked vaguely pleased. She checked his monitors and noted his chart. "Would you like me to stay for a while? For a little company?"

He nodded again. "Please." Now she knew he had to be miserable. 'Please' wasn't a word normally found in his vocabulary. He started coughing hard, and she helped roll him onto his side to ease his chest. After a moment, he was breathing steadily again, and she absently rubbed his back in small, soothing circles.

"You're going to be fine," she said softly.

"Worried... about him." McKay's eyes closed and he shifted uneasily.

"I am too," she admitted, "but he's going to be all right." She offered him more ice, and he took it, seeming grateful.

"Thought he... thought he was gonna die on me." His voice was clearing a little with the cold water. It wasn't so painful to listen to now, though his stark fear came through clearly, without the usual dramatic hyperbole.

She had a lot of paperwork to do, but it could wait a few more minutes. McKay was starting to seem almost human. It was worth seeing. "What happened down there?"

"River," McKay said. "Hit his head on... something in the river. Thought he'd drowned. Thought... lost him." He was shifting restlessly, agitated.

"It's over now. He's safe. You are too."

McKay nodded. "Wish I could see him."

"Not for a couple of days. Neither of you is in any condition to be getting out of bed." She thought for a minute. "He asked after you."

McKay looked up at her, something inexpressible in his eyes. "He did?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

McKay smiled. It was a tiny, satisfied smile. She wondered if Option A might just be wrong. Not that it was any of her business. She'd just assumed Carson was worried about McKay as he'd be worried about anybody else on the station.

Anybody he'd almost died with.

She had a lot to think about.

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It was a few days before Rodney was allowed out of bed to see Carson. His face was a horrifying rainbow of bruises. It made Rodney's gut clench in a very bad way. He'd never seen Carson looking so bad, not even when he thought he was drowned. Carson's responses were still a little slow and scrambled, but everyone was quick to assure him that these things happened with traumatic brain injuries, and that he was definitely getting better.

This didn't stop Rodney from worrying.

They'd been talking some when Carson was awake. At the moment, Radek Zelenka and Erin Siwicki were visiting them. They'd brought some flowers from the mainland, a gift from Carson's Thursday night friends.

"...and so Kavanagh threw it across the room," Zelenka said with a chuckle. Erin just stared at him.

"Well thank God he didn't break it," she said.

"Kavanagh's got the IQ of pond scum," Rodney said.

"I think you're being generous," Zelenka replied. He pulled his glasses off and wiped them with his shirt, then slipped them back on.

"As long as he doesn't blow himself up," Carson said. "Then he'd be my problem."

He saw how drawn Carson looked and made an executive decision. "Okay, playtime's over. Time to go now," Rodney said. "I'm tired."

"Oh," Zelenka said, "the high and mighty one is getting ugly again."


They looked at him. Carson looked at him too, but nodded. "Aye, me too. I'm sorry."

"Sure, doc," Erin said. "I'm sorry. We didn't mean to wear you guys out. Feel better soon, eh?" She leaned over and gave Carson's shoulder a gentle squeeze. He smiled at her.

"You both get some rest," Zelenka said as they left.

"Thanks," Carson whispered when they'd gone. "I didn't have the heart to bid them go."

"I know." He took Carson's hand. "Do you want me to leave too?"

Carson shook his head carefully. "No. I'd rather you stay."

"Okay." He sighed happily. Rodney put an arm on Carson's bed and rested his head there, his fingers twined with Carson's. He really was tired and ached all over, but he didn't want to go.

Carson squeezed his hand. "You were great down there," he said. Rodney felt Carson's other hand caress his hair. Nice. A little scary, but nice. "Thanks for keeping me going. I'd have died if I were alone."

"So would I," Rodney said. Carson's hand started to move away from his hair. "Please, don't stop," he whispered. The fingers returned, stroking gently.

"Rodney..."
"What?" He looked up at Carson.

"You know, you've been here three times now, and we've talked but you haven't said a bloody word." Carson's eyes were half-closed now, and his voice betrayed his exhaustion. "I'd really prefer it if you'd talk to me."

"What do you want me to say?"

Carson sighed. "Are you goin' to be all right, a chàraid?"

He slipped his free hand up onto Carson's chest, just letting it rest there for a few moments. He could feel Carson's heart beating through the thin cloth of the hospital gown. "Maybe," he finally said. "If you are."

"Och, Rodney. What am I goin' tae do with you?" Carson managed a weak smile.

Rodney eased himself over a bit and kissed Carson's mouth softly. It was brief, but felt good, and Carson's lips moved with his. He wished they both felt better. He really wanted to kiss Carson again, but it looked like he was about to pass out.

There was the quiet sound of a throat clearing behind them, and they both started.

"It's okay," she said. It was Shel Tuchman, the nurse. She'd actually been being nice to him recently, which was unusual. Mostly they traded insults when he was in the infirmary.

Rodney blushed. "Uh, look, Tuchman, I can--"

"It's all right, gentlemen." She eyed him suspiciously. "Your secret's safe with me. What you do together is your business, not mine." Her gaze intensified and she locked eyes with him. "But I came to take you back to your bed. You need some rest, Dr. McKay, and so does Dr. Beckett. Visiting hour's over for both of you."

She came and stood beside Rodney, laying a hand on Carson's forehead. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Don't worry, Shel, I'll sleep. I'm half there already, right enough." He took her hand. "You're a fine nurse, luv. I appreciate the care you're taking of us."

She smiled at him gently. "Only the best for you, Carson." Rodney wondered if she had designs on him. Great. Carson was obviously gonna go for the medical chick. They had a lot more in common. She was a hell of a lot nicer than he was, even on her worst days, and why would Carson even want an asshole like him anyway? Tuchman had great tits. She was even pretty. He started to shut himself down, hopeless and bitter. "Dr. McKay?"

He sighed and gave Carson's hand another small squeeze, then stood. This would be just another in a long string of failures, he thought. The pure mathematical precision of his miserable sexual record with other human beings was astonishing.

Tuchman put an arm around him and supported him as they walked back to his bed. She looked him in the eye as she helped him lie down. "You do realize, doctor, that if you hurt him, I'll personally amputate your ass and nail it to the wall in the Gate room. There might be a crowd waiting their turn."

He swallowed. She looked like the sort to carry out a threat. What really surprised him was that she wasn't simply threatening to club him like a baby seal for having kissed Carson in the first place.
"I'll keep that in mind."

She grinned and chuckled. "Just wanted you to know. Try to rest, okay?" She took his hand in a much friendlier gesture than he'd expected. "I think you're an ass, but it seems like you do actually care about Carson, so I'll stay out of it. I meant it when I said I wouldn't tell anyone, but it's for his sake, not yours. Understand that. He's a good man, and I won't just stand by and watch him get hurt. Not by you, not by anyone else."

Rodney nodded. "Okay. Yeah. I get it. Now go do your voodoo somewhere else." Maybe there was still some hope here after all.

"You got it, Dr. Sourpuss. I'll check in on you later. You need anything, just buzz me." Her hand slipped from his and she left.

Would wonders never cease?

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He was burning. Fire was everywhere and he was alone and he was fucking burning. Carson was lying face down in the river and oh god, what if he was dead?

Rodney ran, trying to get to Carson. The rocks slipped under his feet and he twisted an ankle. He stumbled, and burning limbs fell around him, on him, searing his skin. He screamed Carson's name, but his voice was drowned in the roar of the fire.

Smoke blinded him, choked him, and his eyes ran. He wasn't crying. Really. Rodney McKay didn't cry. Not even when he thought his best friend was dead. God, Carson was his best friend.

He scrabbled over the rocks, his flesh burning, hands and knees opening on the rough boulders. "Carson!" Rodney threw himself into the river, and the glacier cold burned as much as the fire.

He was choking on smoke and water and the river's current was trying to drag him away from Carson, but he held on with every bit of strength he had. Gasping, he tore Carson from the river's grasp, dragged him onto the bank and turned him over.

Carson wasn't breathing. His face was almost unrecognizable, battered by the rocks. He wasn't breathing. Rodney put his ear to Carson's chest.

No heartbeat.

No! It wasn't supposed to be this way!

He startled with hands on his shoulders, and Tuchman's urgent voice calling his name. His throat was raw. Without a word, he wrapped himself around her and sobbed. She stiffened for a moment, then put her arms around him and stroked his back, whispering soothing words.

"It's okay, Rodney. You're safe. You're all right. Carson's safe, I swear."

"He's dead, he was dead, I couldn't save him, he was--" He clung to her, still not quite awake and aware.

"He's alive. He's fine. Breathe, Rodney. Wake up."

He suddenly realized where he was and what he was doing. He jerked away from Tuchman. His
eyes widened. Shit, he'd been sobbing on the woman.

"It's okay," she said softly.

"Get away from me," he snarled. Oh fuck, that was embarrassing. "I'm fine."

She nodded and stood. "You were having a pretty serious nightmare, Dr. McKay. I can give you something to help you sleep, so you won't have another."

"Yeah. Sure. Fine. Pill me," he growled, and turned away from her, wiping fiercely at his eyes. At least she was being professional about it. He was having a hard time catching his breath, but took the proffered pill and cup of water when she handed them to him.

"Ah, medical science," he mumbled. "Drug it into unconsciousness and hope it goes away."

"Goodnight, doctor." She left, looking back at him with a concerned expression on her face. He hated her for it. What right did she have to care about him when he was such a mess? He rolled onto his side, letting himself brood for a while. Brooding was good. It made him feel more normal. Like life was going on as usual.

He shook, trying to shiver the nightmare away before the drug dragged him back into sleep. It bothered him, how much he had started to care about Carson. He was just going to get hurt anyway, and he knew it. Getting close to somebody was a waste of time. It was an unacceptable risk. Sex was enough. He was stupid to let himself feel something for anyone else.

Especially for Carson, who was really a prince of a guy when you got right down to it. Not that he'd ever admit that out loud, mind you. That fucking Tuchman had seen him kiss Carson, and that terrified him. She'd said their 'secret' was safe with her, but he knew women: inveterate gossips to a one. By noon tomorrow, everybody would know. He was never going to live this down. They all thought he was a wuss already. If they knew he was kissing guys? All hell was going to break loose -- he just knew it.

He'd probably have some stupid sub-moron Marine gorilla stomping his ass in a hallway as soon as he got out of the infirmary. Joy.

Damn, he was tired. He wished Carson were with him. He'd feel better if he could touch him. He'd wrap his arms around him. Yeah, that would be good. Comfortable. Reassuring. He turned his head to look over his shoulder, back toward Carson's bed at the far end of the room. They were separated by those dumb privacy curtains, of course, so he couldn't see anything.

He wanted the warmth of Carson's back pressed against his chest, needed the reassurance of him breathing against him. He knew if Carson were there, he wouldn't have another nightmare. He'd know, even in his sleep, that everything was all right, that Carson was alive and recovering.

He was a sap. Carson would never actually stay with him. The guy had too many admirers around here. He'd get a better offer and off he'd go, some chickie on his arm, or a way better looking guy. The only thing Rodney had going for him was brains, and he knew it.

Tears ran down his face and he berated himself for his utter stupidity. Why the hell had he ever made a pass at Carson in the first place? He should have stuck with jerking off alone. He was doomed. Want for his friend dug into his gut and the pain stayed as he faded into sleep.

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Carson woke, a little dizzy, but he was starting to get used to that. He hoped it would go away
soon. At least he wasn't forgetting things anymore. He remembered the forest, the river, why they'd been on Tannaz. Remembered Rodney saving his life, and then saving Rodney's. He didn't remember anything between passing out in the fire and waking up in the infirmary, apparently for about the third time, but he didn't really expect to get those memories back. Sometimes these things just vanished, and he could live with that.

He was alive and, despite his worst fears, so was Rodney. They were both recovering. That was what mattered.

Someone was hovering over his bed.

"Carol." It was Dr. Bentz.

"Good morning, Carson. How are you feeling?" She was going through his chart.

"Better, actually. A little dizzy, but I can remember most everything now. My head hurts a wee bit less."

"No more disco?"

He chuckled. "It's gone to bad country western, luv."

She grinned. "I suppose that's an improvement. I think we can take you off the monitors today."

She sat down next to him.

"Oh, good, good."

"Everyone's asking after you, but we're not letting most of them visit yet. You're still not up to it. That visit yesterday was more than enough proof." She put a hand on his wrist. "You need more rest than they'd give you."

He nodded, remembering Zelenka and Siwicki's visit. They hadn't been long, but it had been draining. "Aye, it's true. I still wish I could see folks, though."

"Maybe tomorrow, if you rest up enough today." She smiled softly. He appreciated that everyone was being a little overprotective. Normally it would bother him, but right now he knew he needed it. "You're making a spectacular recovery, but we don't want to take any chances with you."

"How's Rodney?" He looked over toward Rodney's bed, but the privacy curtains were still in place.

"Shel said he had a bad night. Nightmares or flashbacks, apparently. She had to give him some Ativan."

"I'm sorry to hear it. He's still asleep then?" If Rodney were having nightmares, knocking him out for twelve hours or so would probably give him enough rest to get him feeling better. Since he was breathing normally again, the CNS depressant effect wouldn't bother him.

"Yeah. Out cold." She chuckled. "Probably a good thing. He whines so much I just want to strangle him."

"Och, he's not so bad." He sighed. "Any chance I could have a wee look in on him?"

"You said you were dizzy, so no. I'm not letting you get up until that passes." She gave him her 'firm' look.

"Ah, now Carol, you know it's not so bad --"
"Don't you even try to sweet-talk me, Carson. I know you too well." She squeezed his wrist. "Maybe this afternoon, if you're feeling better, we might let you sit up. Chances are, though, that he'll be up and wanting to come see you instead. He's been pretty adamant about it."

"Well," Carson said, "it was a really rough spot, the fire. Almost dyin' with someone can change things."

Carol nodded. "I know; I've seen it happen before. And if anybody needs a friend and some socialization with normal human beings, it's McKay. I just hope you're up to it."

Carson smiled. "I think I can manage." He hoped so, at any rate. He knew how easily Rodney went awry sometimes, and wondered if he'd be all right after whatever had triggered the episode.

He drifted in and out of sleep for much of the day, still exhausted. Head injuries were like that, he knew. He had a slow trickle of allowed visitors -- Elizabeth, Major Sheppard -- but no one was let to stay long. That was fine by him. He didn't say much to anyone, though he was happy they'd cared enough to come by.

Rodney was there when he opened his eyes again.

"Hey."

"Ciamar a tha thu?"

"What?" Rodney looked distinctly puzzled.

"Cia--" Oh bloody crap. It wasn't English. He knew what he wanted to say, but had forgotten the words. Shite.

"Carol," he said, "faigh Bentz!" Damn damn damn. It was worse than he thought. These things could happen with a brain injury. Forgetting things. Forgetting a whole bloody language. Wonderful. And as far as he knew, not one other person on the station spoke Gàidhlig. This was not good. This was unholy awful.

"Carson? Are you all right? You don't sound good."

He shook his head no and pointed off toward the duty desk. "Faigh Carol!" he snapped.

"You want me to get Dr. Bentz?" Rodney had a panicked look in his eyes. Carson wouldn't be surprised if there was a similar expression in his own. He nodded vigorously. Unfortunately, this made his head spin.

Rodney pushed the panic button, and several people came running. Carol was in the lead.

"What's wrong?" She looked at both of them.

"He's -- he's not speaking English. I don't think he can." Rodney looked up at her then back down at him again.

"Oh dear. Carson?" She looked down at him, probably assessing his pupil dilation.

"Carol, Mo... och..." He tried English again, but it wasn't working. It wasn't Gàidhlig this time, but more of a stammer. Frustrated, he gave in to it. "Cha 'n eil Beurla aca!" He grabbed Carol's hand, close to panic.

"Carson, do you understand me?" He nodded. "What language are you speaking?"
Thank god, she'd got it! "Gàidhlig."

Carol turned to Shel. "Get the linguists on the line. See if anybody knows Gaelic. We need a translator up here, stat."

Shel nodded and ran. He sighed and sagged back into his pillow. Now all he could do was wait while they poked and prodded him. He was probably going to have to suffer through a CAT scan and an MRI, at the very least. That was going to mean an extremely uncomfortable day.

About fifteen minutes later, Erin Siwicki came dashing in. That surprised him. He knew she was a linguist, but she worked in anthropology.

"Are you all right, Carson?" she asked him in Gàidhlig. It wasn't that bad, even. Her accent wasn't awful for an American; Lewis with a little South Uist mixed in, he thought. The slight overlay of something vaguely New England was queer, but he'd get used to it if this lasted very long.

He'd never figured her for a Gàidhlig speaker -- more likely Polish, he'd thought. Then again, with Americans you could never be sure. If they spoke more than one language, only god knew what the others might be.

"I've lost my English," he said miserably. "It's got to be the brain injury. Oh, god, what am I going to do?"

"It's okay. We'll work 'round it." She turned to Carol. "He can't remember English," she said in that language.

"It's all right, Carson," Carol said. "You've been doing really well up until now. In all likelihood, this is temporary. It may be a while, but you should get it back. We're going to do the usual scans. I don't want you to panic, okay?"

He nodded. "I hope you're right," he said, and Erin faithfully repeated it for him in English. He was going to have to thank her properly when this was all over. "Are there any other Gàidhlig speakers, or are you the only one?" he asked her quietly.

"Two who have Irish, but you and I know that's not entirely a help," she said. "It's me you're stuck with."

He sighed. "It's luck you're here, then."

"I had no idea you spoke it," she said. "Being Glaswegian and all."

"My parents were from Skye," he told her. "It's my first language."

"That explains it, then," she said. "From what I understand, a person can lose a second language sometimes, if they get some kind of brain trauma."

Carson nodded. "Right, that's it, indeed. I think that's what's happened."

"What's going on?" Rodney snapped.

"Keep your shorts on, McKay," Erin said. "I'm just getting a couple of questions answered with my client. I need to know a couple of things so I can help him properly."

"Client?" Rodney looked well and truly puzzled.

She pointed to herself. "Translator." Her finger moved to Carson. "Client. Is that clear enough for
Carson chuckled. Rodney looked annoyed. "How am I supposed to talk to him, then?"

"The same way you always do, except if you want an answer, I'm probably going to have to give it to you until he gets his English back." Erin shrugged. "Unless you want to learn Scots Gaelic, but that can take a while. It's not nearly so complicated as technical Ancient, but it is one of the rougher ones for English speakers. I mean, I can teach you if you want me to."

"Dr. McKay, we're going to have to get you back to your own bed," Carol said. "We've got a lot of work to do here. Dr. Siwicki's the only one who can stay right now, because we need her to translate for Dr. Beckett."

"But--" Rodney looked like he was about to spit bile.

"Leave it, Rodney," he said, and Erin translated it.

Rodney looked defeated. This was going to be awkward. Very awkward.

"I'll be all right. Just give it a few days. If it goes beyond that, well..." He sighed. "Maybe it's Gàidhlig you'll be learning after all. While I re-learn English." Oh god, that would be annoying. At least he understood it. He wondered if he could read it.

That set him into a panic and he looked up at Carol. "What if I can't read?"

Carol listened to Erin then picked his chart up. "Here, Carson. We might as well find out now."

He took the chart and sighed with relief when it all made perfect sense. "Good, it's good. I can still read. I just can't speak it!"

The next several hours were miserable. He was poked, prodded, scanned, x-rayed, and generally treated like a man with a brain injury. Which, of course, he was, but he'd hoped there wouldn't be any complications in his recovery. Erin was patient, and her vocabulary was fairly good. She only once pulled a palm computer out to check something she wasn't sure of, and it was an idiomatic turn of phrase, so he couldn't blame her.

Once they were done, he was close to agony from the noise and vibrations. "Erin, luv," he said, "can you tell them I want back to my bed? I just can't take any more today."

She nodded. "Of course, Carson. Is there anything I can do for you? I hate to see you like this, depending on me to communicate." She turned and spoke to Carol, then brought her attention back to him.

"That translation program you've got, how good is it?"

"It's just isolated words and short phrases. More of a dictionary than a translation program, really." She handed the palm to him, and he examined it. "I'm not sure it would be of much use to actually speak with anyone, but you can try it if you prefer. The font face is small, though, so it may be a strain on your eyes. I don't want to be a bother."

She was right. It wouldn't be much use, but it would help a bit. "You're no bother. If you'll let me borrow this, I can at least give them a few words when you're not here."

"Anything that'll help set you right, Carson."
He took her hand as they lifted him back onto a gurney. "It's good to have someone to talk to. How did you come to have Gàidhlig?"

"Part of my ethnomusicology studies," she said. "I found an interest in the music, and there was a Gàidhlig choir in town -- the only one in the US at the time, apparently. It was my luck. I learned the language because the music was so beautiful. Even went to Portree for the Mòd one year."

"Portree? That's almost home to me, I've family there." Carson grinned then gave her a surprised look. "Wait, I think I heard about that. There was an American choir -- from Seattle, wasn't it? And they placed second that year. It was a mad shock to everyone, I'll tell you."

She smiled at him and nodded. "Indeed, that was us."

"You've the heart of a Gael, then. I'm over the moon that you're here."

She held his hand as they wheeled him back to his bed. "I'm glad I have the language. I had no thought of ever speaking it here, except maybe to sing. Unlike most of my languages, this was purely for pleasure and the love of the music."

They tucked him back into his bed. Rodney was waiting there, looking stubborn. "I'm not letting them chase me away," he said. He sounded entirely pig-headed.

"I'm sorry Dr. McKay, but he needs his rest," Carol said.

"She gets to stay." Rodney pointed at Erin.

"Not if he's asleep, I don't," Erin replied.

"I'm too tired for talk, Rodney," Carson said. Rodney looked exceedingly annoyed when Erin had to repeat it for him in English.

"Then just let me stay with him. I won't bother him." Rodney's attitude was halfway between pleading and a thunderous demand. Carson wondered how he managed that one. He nodded to Rodney and looked up at Carol.

"Carol?" he asked. "If he just wants to sit with me, that would be fine."

He waited through the translation, and Carol nodded. "All right." She looked at McKay. "But if you keep him awake, you'll be out of here so fast you won't know where you left your ass."

Rodney grumbled but nodded. Erin left a commlink on his bedside table. "If you wake and you need anything, just call me. I'll come right up."

"I can't be disturbing you later." He looked into her grey eyes, hidden behind oval glasses.

"This is my current assignment until you're speaking English again," she said. "Dr. Weir's cleared me from all other duties. I'm at your disposal at all hours. Anytime you need anything, or if you just need to talk, you call me." She had a stern look in her eyes. "I mean it. I don't want to hear that you're lacking for anything because you've refused to call me, you stubborn thing."

"Right, then."

She put a warm hand on his shoulder. "Rest, Carson. I'll come by later tonight, on the chance you need anything."

With that, Erin and Carol left, and he was alone with Rodney. He looked at him and sighed,
wishing he could at least say a few words the man would understand.

Rodney just looked at him for a minute, sorrow keen in his face. "I'm sorry about this, Carson. This just sucks."

Carson nodded and took his hand. "Sleep, Rodney. I need to sleep." But of course, Rodney didn't understand a word of it.

Rodney just leaned over and took him in his arms. Carson held onto him, wondering what would happen if he never got his English back. He couldn't have Erin haunting him all the time, and it could take months before Rodney and the medical staff learned enough Gàidhlig for him to function with them.

He shook as tears leaked silently from his eyes.

"It's okay," Rodney whispered. "It'll be okay. It has to be." He sounded like he didn't believe it.

He held Rodney tighter, saying nothing, trying not to think.

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His English came back slowly over the course of the next three days, but it wasn't the first stroke that felled the tree, as they said. Erin was a blessing to him, patient as a mare with his confused mix of Gàidhlig and English. He was frustrated and angry the whole time, snapping at people when he hadn't meant to. He snapped at her sometimes, too, but she seemed to understand and would let it go.

Rodney's impatience with the situation had an undertone of fear to it, but he'd leaped down the man's throat at one point. It had kept him away for a day and a half, and Carson regretted having done it, but done was done, and he'd just have to apologize when he was able to speak with Rodney alone.

They were releasing Rodney from the infirmary when he saw him again. Erin wasn't nearby, as she'd gone off for her lunch.

"Rodney." Rodney gave him a look as he approached. "I wanted to apologize." The look softened a bit.

"I probably should too," Rodney said. "I wasn't making things easier on you, was I?"

Carson shook his head. "Not really. It's been fr-frustrating, not bein' able to get the words to come right. I shouldn't have taken it out on you though." He still had a little bit of a stammer on some words, but that wasn't too unusual under the circumstances.

"No," Rodney agreed, "you shouldn't have."

"But then, it was a rough sea for both of us, aye?" He took Rodney's elbow in hand.

"Where's that babbling shadow of yours?"

"Lunch."

"Then come sit with me for a few minutes," Rodney said, pulling him off to a quiet corner. "When are you going to be all right again?"

"I don't know. This kind of thing, it's mall -- no, s... slow. It's slow. They'll be letting me up for
light duty in a few days, but it could be weeks or months before I'm quite right again."

Rodney's face fell. "I worry about you."

"I know," Carson said quietly. "Right now, I'm a wee bit worried about me too."

Rodney took a quick look around, then leaned forward and kissed him softly, one hand gentle in his hair. Carson responded, tired but eager. It seemed all wasn't lost between them.

"Thanks," he whispered when Rodney pulled back.

"I just want you to know that this terrifies the shit out of me." Rodney looked away from him.

"So why, then?" He caressed Rodney's cheek. "Why even try, if it's so hard for you?"

Rodney looked back, blue eyes nervous but alight. "Maybe it'll be worth it. Maybe I can get it right this time. You're so... I mean, I can hope, can't I?"

"Sometimes," Carson said, "beauty and terror are the same." He smiled at Rodney. The man had been there for him at the most unexpected moments lately. "I think there's a bit of beauty hidden in you, Rodney. You just don't know it yet."

The stunned look of disbelief on Rodney's face turned slowly into a smile.

~~fin~~

End Notes

Gratuitous Gaelic:

Ciamar a tha thu? - How are you?
Faigh Carol! - Get Carol!
Cha 'n eil Beurla aca - I can't speak English
mall - slow, late

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