

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

SCIENCE AND FICTION

Ray Van Fox
Jordan S. Brock

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

SCIENCE AND FICTION

By Ray Van Fox and Jordan S. Brock

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Science and Fiction

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SCIENCE AND FICTION

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Photo Description

A nude young man lies in a pile of gold leaves in a wooded park. His black hair is streaked with silver. A black tribal tattoo covers his right arm; stars are tattooed along his right side and back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He loved walking in this secluded area of the park, for some odd reason people tended to stay away from it. Nearing the usual path he took into the woods, his eye was caught by a pile of golden leaves ruffling in the crisp, spring breeze. Where would autumn leaves come from at this time of year? As he crept closer to the pile Jake let out a muffled laugh, his curiosity was going to get him in trouble someday, he was sure of it. He came to an abrupt halt and his eyes widened in surprise at the attractive, naked, young man, dark hair streaked with white, shivering amongst the leaves. Tattoos covered his arm and torso, tattoos that seemed to...

Shaking his head Jake looked around; maybe he was intruding in the middle of a photo shoot or movie, but saw no one. Edging closer Jake saw the young man was awake, his expression one of shock.

“Are you all right? Do you need help?” The young man’s hazel-green eyes searched Jake’s face trying to focus. Not getting an answer Jake asked, “What’s your name?”

Opening and closing his mouth a couple times, the young man finally answered in an odd accent, “I... don’t know.”

Frowning, Jake reached into his jacket pocket and removed his phone, then draped the jacket over the young man. He should really call the police, but his instincts told him that somehow they wouldn’t be able to help and he always trusted his gut feelings. “Come on, let’s get you to my place and figure out what to do.”

No, need to use the name Jake unless you want. I just needed a name for the scenario and no need to use the scene I wrote out word for word. Something similar is okay.

I was thinking that the young man hasn't come into his complete powers yet and he can only do that when he finds his 'other'. Not mate so much, as 'key'. They are a partnership, functioning at their best together, but diminished if separate. I like the idea of him being sent to our world by a mentor or family member in order to save him from what was happening in his world or on his planet. Please don't kill off all the young man's family. I really dislike stories that base the plot on having both parents or all of the family killed off, it's so cliché. However, going on the run, into hiding, taken prisoners are all okay. I like the man who finds him to be intelligent but sceptical and always curious. He's a bit too careful at times but his curiosity often gets the better of him. He's a dichotomy. At the same time he has always had an ability that resonates or is tied with whatever ability you give to the young man. Of course you don't have to use all these ideas, but amnesia and the elements and/or magic /or powers/or something unique are definitely wanted.

I'd like this to be a Fantasy or Paranormal, Sci-Fi is okay too. A parallel or hidden world within ours or from another planet works. No Faes or Elves, I don't care for them all that much and no Vampires or Zombies. Shifters are okay and almost any other paranormal type. No horror. Third person and HEA required. Angst and UST are very okay. Explicit sex is also very good. Switching POVs is okay, but please not every other paragraph. I really dislike quickly changing POVs. I love older/younger men relationships and would prefer the 'human' to be around seven to ten years older. No instant love, but immediate attraction and desire is okay. I also love character development. I'd like difficult complications (not simple misunderstandings) and angst that needs to be overcome and then leads to the HEA. If you plan on writing a continuing story after the event, I'd be satisfied with a HFN as long as the sequel was HEA. And finally, I love long stories, so that's a definite plus.

Thank you!

Penumbra

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: other world, military man, scientist, cabin romance, mated/bonded, multidimensional travel, contemporary setting

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SCIENCE AND FICTION

By Ray Van Fox and Jordan S. Brock

Chapter 1

The thin brown ribbon of earth was more a deer path than anything, winding its way along a low gully from the far end of the backyard into West Hills County Park proper, and Craig was trying to make a habit of following it deep into the woods where he'd never run into anyone else. He'd been back home for less than two weeks, and he was determined to stay in shape now that he was almost a civilian. Nineteen and a half years in the Army had taught him to value self-discipline. He wasn't about to let himself go to hell.

The park was quiet, without even wind to stir the new spring leaves that hid the midmorning sky from his sight. Most equestrians stayed down by the public stable, and the joggers and Scout groups stuck to the trails up by Jayne's Hill—a name that never failed to evoke a sad smile in memory of *Firefly*.

Wary of poison ivy, he climbed up out of the gully when the trail petered out. His boot skidded on earth still muddy from last night's rain, and he had to grab hold of a slender trunk to keep his balance. He swung up onto higher ground near a clearing...

And there he stopped, senses coming alert at the anomaly before him.

Autumn gold leaves, shaped like fat teardrops the size of his palm, had fallen in a mound in a patch of sunlight. All around the clearing, the trees were maple, or so Craig thought. Whatever they were, they had rough-toothed leaves shaped exactly like that Canadian hockey team's logo. These leaves were... aspen? He dredged through his memory. Aspen had teardrop-shaped leaves, but there weren't any aspen trees nearby that he knew of.

He looked away from the leaves to the ground around them. He saw no wires, no sign of disturbance in the mossy earth, dotted with clumps of grass and dandelions. No hint that the pile of out-of-place leaves covered a trap. Stepping closer meant getting a better sense of how they got there, but his time overseas had him wary of triggering an explosive.

But his gut told him there was no danger, and he'd gotten very good at listening to his intuition. It had saved more lives than he cared to count, including his own many times. So, he walked slowly over to the golden pile, searching around the clearing for any sign of movement.

This was the perfect trap: a mystery cloaked in the harmless memory of jumping into piles of leaves his dad had raked off the lawn. Nothing to trigger

unpleasant associations or danger. He *knew* it could be dangerous, but that didn't stop his slow, measured footsteps until he was at the very edge of the pile.

A pile that, he now saw, was moving, shifting with no wind, rustling so softly that the sound was swallowed by the low hum of the distant parkway and the still forest air. What kind of animal burrowed into a pile of leaves in the middle of a clearing to take a nap? Or maybe it was a litter of animals, since he could see movement over a four-foot span, and the odds there was a bear in this suburban park full of nature trails were slim to none. Fox kits? Raccoon babies? Groundhog pups?

Serial killer's dumping ground? This was a scene right off network TV, after all. *Hannibal* couldn't have scripted it better: out-of-season leaves, fresh and crisp, piled over a body...

But that instinct in the back of his brain was still quiet and content, not shrieking warnings. So, he nudged the leaves with one boot. When nothing snapped out at him or blew up, he crouched down, brushing his hand over the leaves.

The sunlight picked out gold highlights over pale tan. It took him a regrettably long time to recognize it as skin rather than faded leaves or bark. That must mean a living human, if it moved, because a scavenging animal would have uncovered the body instead of digging under and leaving the pile intact. What was a person doing under a leaf pile in a park? Unless they were hurt and hiding from a threat of some sort?

That thought kicked him into gear. Having been a combat medic in the Army for so long, he was automatically thinking through ways of evacuating the injured party before he had brushed away enough of the leaves to assess the damage. The terrain would be problematic; if he had to call for rescue, they'd have to come in on foot with a stretcher.

Or maybe not. He cleared off one arm with a thick black tribal sleeve tattoo, and the fingers twitched in reaction. Skin temperature seemed cool but not dangerously so. Breathing was steady and unlabored.

He brushed off more leaves and found his patient was lying face-down. More tattoos covered the patient's back, from below the shoulder blade to above the hip in a pattern of five-pointed stars. Craig shifted around the leaf-pile and cleared away the leaves over his patient's head, revealing soft, clean hair, black streaked with silvery-gray. In profile, his patient's face was

delicately boned but most likely masculine, with a pointed jaw that was lightly stubbled with dark hair.

In fact, that stubble was the only sign of neglect. Every inch of skin was clean and free of dirt, other than fragments of gold leaves caught in those soft strands of hair. No blood, no bruising, no sign of any injury at all.

No sign of clothing, either. Just tattoos and leaves that now did little to cover his patient's slender body.

Craig froze when his patient made a quiet sound, a low groan that sounded more sleepy than pained. He figured he should stop being creepy and forego further examination, and instead simply ask the patient what was wrong, if anything. Unless, of course, they were high on something or suffering from a psychological condition, in which case getting a straight answer might be difficult.

He split the difference and reached for the patient's wrist as he asked, "You okay? In any pain?"

Another soft groan was his only answer. Long fingers twitched, rustling the leaves. Craig could feel the beat of a steady pulse, strong but not too quick. His breathing still seemed normal. Maybe this was a... *thing* this person did? One of those crazy, back-to-nature holistic-healing type rituals? Just Craig's luck, if so. Hopefully they hadn't tried to live off foraged mushrooms and berries. It would be a while before he could get them to a hospital to pump their stomach.

"Hey, friend. Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

This time, the groan was drawn out, accompanied by a flutter of the longest, darkest eyelashes Craig had seen in years. His patient gave a little shake of his head, scattering leaves, then rolled onto his side. More leaves fell—and, yes, Craig saw that his patient was both naked and definitely male, though he didn't see any more tattoos.

He pulled free of Craig's slack grasp to swipe weakly at the hair caught in his eyelashes as he blinked his eyes open. Hazel with emerald and gold flecks fixed on Craig's face. His patient's pupils shrank normally in reaction to the patchy sunlight filling the clearing.

After another groan, the young man asked, a bit plaintively, "Tea?"

Seriously? Who was this character? "First things first, kid. Are you hurt?"

"Of course I'm not," his patient insisted in what sounded almost like a British accent—maybe a fake one, since it wasn't quite right. "My devices

work perfectly. I'm... *Leaves?*" he asked, blinking around himself as he struggled to sit up.

Devices? There wasn't anything of the kind on or around the young man's body. Maybe he was on something or just really confused as to where he was. Craig moved back and half-turned away, to give him some room and at least a modicum of privacy. If he wasn't hurt, all Craig would need to do was point him in the right direction and send him on his way. Possibly lend him something in the way of clothing, too. Early spring was too chilly to be walking around naked, risking arrest.

"Do you know where you are?" Craig asked.

"Of *course* I do," the young man said, though he was frowning. When he lifted his hand to push his hair back out of his eyes again, the ripple of muscles gave the illusion that his tattoos moved. "I'm... well, right *here*..." He trailed off, looking around. Then he eyed Craig and asked, "Who are you?"

He almost replied with his full name and rank, then decided against it, in case the formality—or the armed forces affiliation—freaked the young man out. "I live nearby. My name's Craig. And you are...?" He held out his hand in introduction.

"I'm—" The young man froze in mid-speech, blinking a couple of times before his dark brows drew down. "That's vexing. I'm not entirely certain," he muttered. "And I'm not wearing anything. Did an intimate moment just turn awkward for both of us or just me?"

Craig held up his hands in surrender. "I found you like this. Just now. Did you sustain a head injury?" Pupil dilation wasn't a completely reliable indicator of concussion, and memory loss should be taken seriously.

"That's unfortunate. I'd prefer to have a *good* reason for waking up naked in the Shadowlands," the young man scolded.

"I... Shadowlands?" The more this kid spoke, the less he made sense. Head injury was a definite possibility, because there was no way that was a pickup line.

"Here. This appalling lack of technology." He pushed off the ground as if to stand, then fell back, grabbing hold of Craig's arm. "And gravity. Gravity is *definitely* malfunctioning at the moment."

Okay, right. Totally high. "Uh-huh. Let's get you someplace safe where you can sleep it off. And put some clothes on." Craig reached with his other hand to

help the young man up and keep him steady on his feet. “My house is this way.”

“I’m fine. I just need tea.” He had all the coordination of a baby deer taking its first steps, and he ended up clinging by a double-handful to Craig’s windbreaker. Standing, the young man was just a few inches shorter, and with his silvered hair, Craig considered upping his estimated age by five or so years. “You’re *certain* this isn’t something more intimate?” he asked, body swaying distractingly against Craig’s.

Biting down on his knee-jerk response—“not as of yet”—Craig did his best to help keep his charge upright without touching him too much. Or looking too long. “I’m certain. No ‘intimacy’ has occurred.” Just awkwardness, it seemed.

That got him a frustrated-sounding exhale. “I must be ill, then. That would explain the dizziness and the”—he waved his free hand at his own head, though this did nothing to help him keep his balance—“fuzzy memory issues. It’s *almost* like retrograde amnesia, post-teleport, but it shouldn’t be lasting this... long...” He looked up suspiciously, meeting Craig’s eyes from just inches away. “Just how far into the Shadowlands are we?”

“If I knew what the hell you were talking about, I’d—”

“Hell.” The young man poked Craig in the sternum with one finger. “You said ‘Hell.’ This is shift-zero, isn’t it? Earth?”

Shift-what? Post-teleport? Whatever this kid was on, Craig wanted to know, so he could avoid it. It made you crazy, clearly. He rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. “Yeah, Earth. As if there was another option. How high are you?”

The young man considered for a couple of seconds before saying, “*Ollav?* Yes, that... that sounds right. Though I don’t teach. No time for that sort of thing. And Earth...” Still clinging to Craig’s windbreaker, he turned to look around the clearing. “Very green. A bit bland, though, isn’t it?”

This was starting to sound like a problem. This guy had started out so coherent, if mildly baffled, but now he was making less than zero sense, and his babbling was worrying Craig. “Sure, kiddo. All right. Let’s just get home. Then we can argue the merits of Spring versus Fall.”

“Where’s your—” Another suspicious look. “You don’t *have* a teleporter, do you? Grav-cancellation field? Not that another teleport this soon after a cross-dimensional ’port would be wise, but that’s never stopped me. I could have probably fixed the... What is it again? The harmonic backlash. Yes, I

could probably have fixed that, if I'd *known*... I don't suppose you know *why* I'm here, do you?"

"Search me. 'Why' seems the least of your troubles. And *nobody* has a 'teleporter,' in case you've forgotten." Craig decided to steer them toward a wide, shallow-grade trail. It would be a lot easier than the deer path, if a bit longer of a walk. He started that way, keeping his arm around his charge's waist. He would've handed over the windbreaker, but the young man was still clinging to the nylon.

"Well, no. Nobody *here*. You still have those battery-operated carriages, don't you? Autos?" The young man laughed, leaning against Craig. "Not very efficient, but at least—"

"*Here?* Where the fuck do you think you're from, buddy?"

"The *Cathair*... You're *not* a portal guardian, are you?"

"What is that supposed to even mean?" This was starting to get too weird for Craig to want to continue his rescue mission. He had just gone out for a walk, anyway. Maybe he should just take this kid to the ranger station up by Jayne's Hill.

The kid dug in his heels, refusing to take another step, though he didn't let go of Craig's jacket. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm just... making things up. For a... thing. A reading thing. A thing you read—"

"A book?"

"That's it. I'm writing a book, and I'm making things up because it's a book of... fictional, made-up things."

The wide-eyed panic with which he spoke made it clear to Craig that the kid was lying. And that made everything more confusing, somehow. Because if this young man actually thought everything he'd said up until this point was *real*, then Craig was in over his head, because this fell into the realm of delusion.

And yet, a little warning was pricking in the back of Craig's mind that handing him over to the authorities in that state was unwise, possibly dangerous. And he had long since learned to listen to those warnings. He pried the kid's fingers off his jacket and held onto a shoulder as he shrugged out of his windbreaker, then handed it over. "Here. Put this on. And talk about your book all you like. Just... Let's get you home."

"I shouldn't—Oh," he said, pausing in the act of putting the windbreaker on like a jacket, rather than wrapping it around his waist. "Nithael."

"What does that mean in your fictional world?" Craig figured playing into the delusion for a bit wouldn't hurt, if it got the kid to move faster.

"Nithael," he said again, pronouncing it slowly. He put the other sleeve on, then tugged the jacket down. His frame was small enough that it hung to his hips, though it didn't actually *cover* anything. "My name. I'm..." He tipped his head, eyes falling closed as his hand slipped into the jacket pocket where Craig usually kept his cell phone. His brand new, very expensive, just-signed-a-two-year-contract cell phone.

Craig reached out to stop the young man, only to freeze when *darkness* slithered over the bare strip of skin between the jacket's cuff and the pocket. When Nithael pulled the cell phone out, his hand was almost completely black, as if ink had spilled down his arm, under the surface of his skin, to flow over his hand and circle around his fingers.

What the fuck was that? Craig pulled his hand back, worried the ink might spread to his skin if he touched it. "You... That... *can't* be good. What *is* it?"

"Nanoaetheric sensors. This is *nice*," Nithael said, eyes closed almost completely. "Very compact. You've made strides in miniaturization, haven't you? Of course, your battery's rubbish, but you won't make real progress until you increase your field detection capability." Then he blinked a couple of times, and the blackness receded from his hand, disappearing under the jacket's sleeve again. "You're Craig or Ellis?"

Craig started to wonder if the drug Nithael was on was topically applied, and if it had rubbed off on *him*. He shook his head to clear it. "Craig Standish. My grandfather's name is Ellis."

"Standish?" Nithael frowned at him. "That's your account name. Why would you name yourself for that?"

Craig frowned back, wishing one damned thing would make sense when it came to this kid. "Account name? It's my last name. My family name. Any account I have was based off of it, not the other way around."

"Family name. Oh. Yes, you do that sort of thing." Nithael offered him the phone. It seemed to be unharmed, except the screen was illuminated. And unlocked. Craig hadn't seen Nithael's fingers touch the screen at all.

“If you know my account, where did you get Ellis from?” Craig was almost certain he’d never used his grandfather’s first name as an account-verifying answer. And something in the back of his mind was telling him Grampa Ellis might be helpful right about now.

“Your”—Nithael made an elegant gesture, wiggling his fingers at the phone—“tower-based communications matrix reader-speaker-thing.”

“Phone?”

“Phone! That’s the word. Only it’s not transparent, like the ones in *Iron Man*. Older design?” he asked with a curious sort of dignity, considering he was wearing a too-large nylon windbreaker and no pants.

“*Iron Man* is fiction. Science fiction. This is what reality looks like.” Craig held up his phone and shook it slightly for emphasis.

“That’s disappointing. His repulsor technology looks almost like crude gravitic reversal field generators. I suppose that’s not ‘reality’ either?”

The apparent seriousness of the question made Craig snort out a laugh that he tried to disguise as a cough. “Ah, no. Sorry. Is gravity still a problem for you or can we move this along?” He wanted to get home and... for some reason he felt like he should call Grampa Ellis. That was usually a sign.

“No, it’s actually identical to what I’m accustomed to. All the basics are. Well, gravity and air composition are. Light, radiation, and mineral composition, not so much. And let’s not even get started on our lack of biological animals, right down to insects. As I understand it, the only thing that kept us from dying out because of a lack of intestinal bacteria was the fact that we had to import all our food. Of course, that was before we had biostabilization systems—And why am I even telling you this? Stop listening to me. Fiction, remember? Writing a book,” Nithael scolded, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets.

Craig closed his mouth, which had dropped open at the speed with which nonsense was pouring out of Nithael, and started walking in the direction of his house, assuming his guest would follow. “Right. Who’s ‘us’ then, in this fictional world that isn’t Earth?” Playing along seemed the best way to keep the kid occupied while Craig figured out what to do with him.

“Never mind. Not important. I’ll just... I’ll be fine. I just need a lab.” Nithael caught up, though he stumbled, shoulder bumping into Craig’s arm. “And a power source.”

Craig was pretty sure he didn't want this kid doing any experimenting, especially with electricity, before he'd sobered up at least somewhat, but he'd deal with that later. "Let's start with tea."

Nithael caught hold of Craig's arm, presumably for balance. He *was* barefoot, after all, and the hiking trail was paved but not finished, leaving the surface rough. "That would work. Or coffee. Do you have coffee? You *have* heard of it, haven't you? That's not from some... other region?"

Smiling despite himself, Craig nodded as he fell into step with Nithael. "That, I've heard of. But I just make regular drip, one cup at a time, strong and black. For a frou-frou drink, you'll have to drive to the shop down the road."

"Froofroo?"

Craig looked over at the frankly adorable confused face Nithael was making and cracked another rare smile. "Coffee with *stuff* in it. Milk, foam, caramel, whipped cream, I dunno. Stuff that distracts from the taste of the actual coffee."

Nithael frowned. "That hardly makes sense. And milk—from cows and goats?" He shook his head, then clutched Craig's arm as the motion played havoc with his balance. "As I understand it, I can't digest anything like that."

No wonder he was so thin. Craig figured he was probably a vegetarian too. Maybe a full-on vegan. Craig's house was not at all set up for a picky eater like that, but he could probably find something for the kid to eat before sending him on his way. "Great. Black coffee it is, then."

Thankfully, they met no one on the way home, though Craig had trusted his "instincts" to warn him in time to duck off the trail and find a hiding spot. It helped that Nithael didn't protest when Craig left the walking trail and led him into the brush, then over the long-dead hedge into the backyard. All the fast-talking in the world probably couldn't explain his pantsless, confused "guest."

The house was a sprawling, split-level building, with a brick façade on the main floor and gray siding with white trim everywhere else. Craig could still remember when his dad had replaced the old wood siding with aluminum. It lasted longer but lacked the charm of wood—not that Craig was arguing now. The last thing he wanted to do was scrape, sand, and repaint every few years now that he was in charge of the old place.

Spring meant every rainstorm sent the backyard into a frenzy of growth. Craig had mowed the lawn a couple of days ago, but it was already ragged,

with a healthy growth of dandelions and daisies. Only the horse pen in the corner was stripped down to bare earth thanks to the ill-tempered pony that had lived there for at least twenty years. Flower, the barn's sole resident, kicked at the fence in hopes of intimidating Craig into providing a second breakfast.

Refraining from kicking back at Flower, Craig motioned to Nithael to follow him into the house. "Don't mind grampus over there."

"What's a grampus?"

"Oh, he's just got a nasty disposition. Except when it comes to little kids. Then he acts like a normal pony and lets them ride him. My nieces adore him."

Nithael looked at the pony as they crossed the weedy yard. "It's a programmed youth companion-synth?"

"Synth?"

"Synth. Synthetic animal—" Nithael stopped in his tracks and looked back. In a fit of horsey pique, Flower had turned his back and was swishing his tail. Craig suspected that was Flower's way of flipping them off.

Synthetic, programmable ponies. The inside of this kid's brain was a fascinating place. So was whatever world he was building in there. "Ignore him. I'd be pissed off too if my name was Flower. Come on."

"Mmm, possibly. It takes considerable reprogramming to alter a name after it's been given." Nithael followed him up the stairs to the back door.

Craig shook his head as he fished the house keys out of the pocket of his jeans. He unlocked and opened the door, immediately kicked his boots off at the mat just inside, and waved toward the kitchen table. "Make yourself at home. I'll start coffee, then find you pants."

"Pants." Nithael looked Craig over, then shrugged. "I suppose it's customary?"

Craig cocked one eyebrow up at the insinuation, but decided it would be best not to take the bait. "To... wear clothes? When a guest in a stranger's house, yes." He flipped the switch on the single-use coffee machine that had gotten him through life on bases all over the world.

"It doesn't seem very dangerous in here—not like my lab," Nithael said, going right to the nearest cupboard. He poked at the door, then waved his hand in front of it, before he finally pulled on the knob to open it. "Not very

temperature-controlled, though. My biostabilization system is at capacity to maintain thermal regulation.”

Having run that whole statement through his science-speak translator, Craig rolled his eyes as he replied. “I’m pretty sure that’s why people *wear clothes*. To stay warm. I’ll be right back. Mugs are in the cabinet to your right.”

“Not very efficient,” Nithael said thoughtfully as he moved to the next cupboard. Craig had no idea if he was talking about clothes or coffee mugs. Either seemed likely.

He headed to the bedroom that had always been his, even when on leave. It took him a moment to find a pair of sweatpants—something with a drawstring so they wouldn’t fall off those narrow hips—because he still hadn’t put his mound of clothes away after washing them all when he unpacked. This was only day nine of civilian life, back in the family house that his parents had vacated for their condo in Florida. He was still getting used to having the place to himself.

One of his gray army T-shirts would have to do, though Nithael would end up swimming in it. Craig considered underwear and socks, but the thought of giving a stranger his underwear was a little weird.

He headed to the kitchen to toss the clothes at Nithael and tell him to go change, but found he’d stripped off the jacket and was standing there, completely naked. “Here, try—”

The clothes fell from Craig’s grasp as his gaze fixed on Nithael’s right arm, where the tattoo was *visibly* sliding down his arm, undulating and curling at the edges. His hand, pressed to the iPod in its docking station, was pitch black.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?” Panic at the impossible sight made his voice military-sharp.

“Interfacing. Does this *only* exist for sound storage and playback?” Nithael asked, sounding disappointed.

“Yes. Stop touching it. Jesus.”

Nithael’s fingers twitched. He looked back and blinked a couple of times—and Craig did *not* allow himself to dwell on the way Nithael’s eyes had gone black, pupils dilated to completely overtake his hazel irises. Instead, he looked at Nithael’s hand and watched the darkness bleed from his fingertips up his arm, curling and coiling around slender muscles before settling into the tattoo Craig had first seen.

Once it stopped moving, Nithael turned to face Craig, looking genuinely contrite. "I apologize. Is it a religious icon?"

"What?" Craig blinked and found himself distracted by the green now visible in Nithael's eyes. "No, I just... That's fucking creepy."

"Creepy? What's *creepy*? Are those for me?" Nithael asked, pointing at the fallen clothes.

Craig leaned down to swipe them off the floor and stepped forward to hand them to Nithael, only to shudder at the idea of being touched by his no-longer-black hand. "Creepy. Like the feeling of something creeping up behind you. How the fuck does your tattoo *move*?"

"It's not a tattoo." Nithael sorted out the shirt from the pants, then pulled the shirt over his head. "It's a swarm of nanoaetheric sensors. It's a basic diagnostic interface. Well, not *basic*. I made some improvements." He shook his head, making a wreck of his silver-streaked hair, and grinned at Craig. "It's my specialty, you could say."

Managing to keep his gaze above Nithael's hips, Craig nodded. Then shook his head. "No, hang on. You specialize in swarms of tiny sensors that move all over your skin and tell you shit about the technology you're touching? *Where the fuck* did you come from?"

Nithael opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked down and put on the pants, biting his lower lip. "Fiction. Right. I never even pretended to want to be an emissary or portal guardian, you know. There's a reason I don't do *people*. Ignore everything. I've made it all up. I have a very vivid imagination."

Craig huffed in exasperation. "Well, I don't. So explain to me what the fuck is going on, because I just saw the ink on your arm *move*, and I'm stone cold sober."

"I'm... It's..." Nithael looked at his arm, where half of the tattoo—or *whatever*—was visible below the sleeve that hung down to his elbow. "I have no idea. It's an embedded layer of sensors built using nanomancy, powered by my body's generated aetheric currents, allowing me to have a direct neural interface with any electronic device or system. I'd do much better at this if I had caffeine, you know," he added, giving Craig a credible lost-puppy look, complete with a slight pout to his lower lip.

The sight was actually gorgeous, Craig would admit, but he was pretty sure Nithael knew it just as well as he did, and he wasn't going to let this go. His

level of panic had died down to a minimum, especially since his gut feeling about this strange kid had never once pricked towards danger, but none of this made any actual sense. He stalked over to the coffee maker, took a mug down from the cabinet, poured the entire contents of the carafe into the mug, and set it down a little too sharply on the counter next to Nithael's hip.

"You're upset," Nithael said uncertainly. "Is this something I need to fix, or is it you?"

Craig took a deep breath and considered the answer to Nithael's question. It seemed like a fair one to ask, given Craig was starting to feel like the crazy person in this situation. "I need you to speak plain English, without a lot of made-up words, and tell me where you came from and how I can help get you back there."

Nithael frowned and picked up the coffee cup. He sniffed at it, then took an experimental sip before he winced. "English isn't my native language. I'm supplementing with words for which you have no analogues, at least in the linguistic references I've studied. Mostly BBC programming and movies."

Sighing sharply and waving his hand in a circle in the general direction of Nithael's head and chest, Craig said, "All of that you just said? Not what I asked for. Try again." He turned away to refill and reset the coffee machine. He clearly needed more caffeine for this interaction as well.

"I'm from the *Cathair*. It would translate to 'city' in English, though that may not be accurate, since there are seemingly arbitrary distinctions between 'town,' 'village,' 'city,' and 'metropolis,' based on population, infrastructure, and political or economic status."

Craig heard Nithael's mug *click* against the counter. When he looked over, he saw Nithael had hopped up to sit beside it, disdaining the perfectly good table and chairs not five feet away.

He turned to face Nithael, resting his hip against the counter. "I don't care about the size of it—just where it is and how to get you back there." He realized he probably sounded like a bad host, but he wasn't really prepared to have a guest in this house. He still felt like one himself.

"It's plus-three shifts away, which is the core problem. I must have teleported here"—Nithael looked down at himself, and he scrunched his nose—"but I didn't come through with a destination receipt to counter the amnesia, which means it was a private teleport. Probably from my own lab. And that

means I *meant* to come here—well, there,” he corrected, pointing out towards the backyard. “I don’t make mistakes, ever.”

“Well, someone did, if you don’t remember, right? Why come if you don’t know what you’re doing here?” Craig realized Nithael had left off talking about fiction, and he himself had stopped assuming he was talking to someone who was high or crazy. What surprised him most about that was how *not*-weird that felt.

“Obviously that wasn’t my intention. I *did* know what I was doing. It’s the normal, expected effect of a teleport. Which doesn’t precisely explain what happened to my clothes, though a minus-three shift to drop here, to shift-zero... Did I *actually* do the jump in a direct teleport, rather than in stages? That would explain it. My biostabilization system would protect me...” Nithael dropped down off the counter, looking around. “I need a tablet.”

Of course he would ask for something so high tech. “I’ve just got my laptop.” Craig glanced over at the level of coffee in the carafe and was tempted to just grab it to drink out of, even though that was a horrible idea. Instead, he left the coffee pot to run for just a minute longer while he retrieved his three-year-old computer from the dining room and brought it to the kitchen table. “You can use this, if it will help.”

Nithael turned the laptop, then wrapped his hand around the side, right over the USB port. As he sat down, folding one leg under himself, the tattoo on his arm started to writhe and flow down over the back of his hand. Craig was sure he’d never get used to that sight. It made him shiver and turn away to finally pour his coffee.

He’d barely filled the mug, though, before Nithael said, “This... doesn’t *do* anything. What is this thing?”

Craig kept himself from leaning over and resting his forehead on the counter, but it was a close thing. Instead he just sighed, brought his coffee to the table and leaned over Nithael’s shoulder to look at the computer screen. “It’s a computer. What do you think it does? It connects to the Internet and all that, even if it’s not new and fast and pretty.”

Nithael frowned. “The Internet. With the non-synth cats.”

What? Craig was really starting to feel like *he* was the one on drugs. He looked over at Nithael, who somehow wasn’t joking, and deadpanned, “There’s more than cats on the internet.”

“Well, yes. But how will pornography help me with my calculations? I need something that can record equations, not sex.”

An inch away from face-palming, Craig managed to keep his voice at a normal level. “It’s a *computer*; it computes. What the fuck equations are you doing that you can’t record them on this? Watch out, or you’ll get nothing more than a fucking pen and paper.”

Abruptly, Nithael’s frown melted into a pleased smile. The darkness bled back from his fingernails, and he pulled his hand away from the laptop. “That would be fine. It’ll probably be more efficient.”

Thankfully, Craig had to walk all the way to the office to find a working pen and a notepad, because he was starting to want to break things. And that boy was too pretty to hurt. Or be made to watch Craig break his hand on the wall or something. Part of him—the part that understood reality—was having an incredibly hard time functioning right now, but another part of him was starting to hum like a well-oiled machine, and the contrast was giving him vertigo.

He returned to the kitchen and handed the pad and pen over, then retreated to the doorway to watch as Nithael pounced. He turned the page sideways and started scrawling down the lines in columns of numbers that looked *almost* recognizable. As Craig sipped his coffee, Nithael filled three-quarters of the page, ripped it from the pad, and then started on a second sheet, this one with more symbols, none of which looked like algebra or the Greek letters used in more advanced math.

Halfway through the second page, Nithael stuck the pen in his mouth and gestured over at his abandoned coffee cup. “Caffeine,” he said around the pen, never taking his eyes from his work.

Craig rolled his eyes but picked up the mug. The coffee was cool enough to be bitter, so he dumped it out in the sink. He refilled and reset the coffee maker, and he put Nithael’s mug in the carafe’s place for efficiency’s sake. Then he left the wiz kid to his work and went into the living room to sprawl out on the couch.

Before he’d really registered what he was doing, his phone was out of his pocket and he was scrolling through his recent dials for Grampa Ellis’s number. He knew what that meant, though, and it didn’t bother him. Something in him felt it was necessary to make contact, so he did.

It took a few rings for Grampa to pick up—at ninety-three it took him a while to get to the phone—but when he did, he sounded unsurprised. “Well, hello there.”

“Hey, Gramps. How’s things?”

“Fine on my end, why? What’s up, Doc?”

Craig smiled at the “joke” his grandfather never failed to tell. He always tried to sound like Bugs Bunny when he said it, but he usually failed miserably. And yet, it was a sweet nod to Craig’s chosen profession that he appreciated. “Disturbance in the Force, possibly? You had anything go wonky for you in the last, say, twenty-four hours?”

Gramps went quiet for a moment, then said, “Hmm... Saw something last night—well, early this morning, really. Felt like a birth. Looked like an explosion, but not combustion. More like an energy field.”

Could that be what a “three-shift teleport” did to the universal energy Gramps had taught him about? Possibly. “Was I anywhere near it?”

“Not you, no. My pops. He was the one that set it off.”

Well, that didn’t sound good. Why was Grampa Ellis seeing something so far back in the past when something so odd was happening in the present? “But everything’s okay out by you? And you weren’t affected?”

“Yep, peachy. I checked. And you know, the normal things—a headache, a deep thirst, falling asleep on your feet—but no drastic shifts in perception or accidental breakages. All in all, it was a pretty benign vision.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. It was always good to hear the all-clear from Grampa Ellis, even if Craig hadn’t been getting any warning signals himself. “Okay. Well, thanks.”

“You plan on telling me why you asked?”

“Maybe when I know more. My world feels a little too large and full of holes, but not in a bad way. Nothing building too fast or any odd surges. I just didn’t get a heads-up.”

“Well, if you see anything, let me know.”

“Will do. Thanks, Gramps. Love you.”

“You too, kiddo. Take care, you hear?”

“Loud and clear.”

Craig took the phone from his ear and went to thumb the *End Call* button, but a glaring white starburst obscured the screen. He looked up and back towards the front window, thinking the neighbor across the street was pulling out of his driveway and the sun glare off his hood had caught his phone, but all he saw was sunshine and trees.

Inside, though, the light was so bright, it made the sunlight seem dim. The whole living room looked flat and overexposed, colors washed out in a haze of painfully bright light. He blinked and lifted his phone to shade his eyes from the end table lamps that glowed like halogens, not the soft incandescent bulbs his mom preferred. The overhead light was on, too—as was the old TV, screen glowing with static, though there was no sound.

He stood, blinking away tears, and reached to turn off the lamp, but a visible blue spark jumped to his fingers, stinging him. Swearing under his breath, he jerked his hand back and went for the hallway. The brilliant whitewash was there, too. The sconces cast such bright light on the ceiling that the cobwebs in the corners threw deep shadows over the off-white paint.

This wasn't right. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and only then became aware of how his heart was racing, pounding against his ribs. Adrenaline surged through his veins, but there was no outlet—no firefight below his chopper, no wounded to rescue, no bleeding to stop. So he stood there, breathing, remembering Grampa Ellis's calm, matter-of-fact reassurances that Craig was perfectly normal.

That whatever happened to him, whatever strange things he experienced, he was *okay*.

Slowly, his eyes stopped burning. And when he opened them, he saw the hallway lights were off. He turned to the living room, where only one lamp was still on, glowing at a gentle twenty watts.

He could distinctly hear the scratch of Nithael's pen coming from the kitchen, and he remembered Nithael's half-assed insistence that everything was fictional. He couldn't help but wonder for a second if he had ever been a good candidate to be the one to know where the line was between reality and fiction.

Chapter 2

The “whiteout” must have lasted longer than Craig thought. That or Nithael was a lightning-fast worker, which... was a possibility, Craig decided, watching Nithael fill his seventh page. The other six were arranged on the table, with lines drawn across careful overlaps to show how they connected. He didn't look up as Craig walked into the kitchen. He also hadn't fetched his mug from the coffee pot.

As he set the mug next to the papers, Craig thought about asking Nithael if he'd noticed anything weird with the lights. Given his incredibly deep level of concentration, though, the odds he'd even answer were slim. Craig was almost certain that if he stripped naked directly in front of Nithael right then, he wouldn't even look up from his work.

“How's it coming?”

Nithael switched the pen to his left hand and went back to writing. He picked up the coffee mug with his right. “I definitely did a direct shift here. It could be—” He glanced at Craig and took a quick sip of the coffee. “Diurnal clock? Hours, minutes, days, in arbitrary quantities? Or is that fiction?”

“Fact. Twenty-four hours, sixty minutes, seven days. It's not that arbitrary, 'cause it follows the sun. And seconds are heartbeats. Kinda.” Craig moved to the counter to refill and reset the coffee maker once again. One or the other of them was always going to need more caffeine at the rate they were going. For the first time in years he wished he had a larger coffee pot.

“Hmm.” After a few more left-handed scribbles and another sip of coffee, Nithael said, “It could be up to forty more hours, estimating that I've been here for between one and three, plus or minus an error factor of four. Or five. I don't suppose you witnessed my arrival, did you?”

Craig shook his head. “Nope. Found you under those autumn leaves a minute before you woke up.”

The pen stopped. Nithael looked up, giving a little shake of his head to get his hair out of his eyes. It didn't work. “*Autumn* leaves? Spring, summer, autumn, winter.”

Craig frowned. That didn't sound like a question of semantics. “The bright yellow aspen leaf pile you were in. That doesn't happen in the spring. The leaves turn colors in the fall. Autumn.”

“Autumn,” Nithael repeated thoughtfully. He dropped the pen and shoved the chair back so he could get to his feet. Still holding the mug, he went right for the back door and tapped his free hand on the window. “It’s not autumn, though. Look. That’s *new* growth.”

Craig sighed. “That’s what I’m saying. It’s spring. April. The fourth month. That’s why I came poking around your hiding place. Because dead leaves like that in spring stood out.”

Nithael turned, and a slow smile lit up his hazel eyes. “That means it was a *temporal* shift! And they said it couldn’t happen.” He burst into laughter and put his mug down so he could rush at Craig and grab hold of his arms. “A temporal shift! I *knew* it wasn’t just theoretical!”

“If you’re talking about time travel, I give up.” Even if this kid *was* from another planet—or something stranger—and was surprisingly compelling in his oddity, Craig had to draw the line at some point. This felt like it. Despite all the strange things he’d seen in his lifetime, time travel was just too much like science fiction.

“Not time *travel*. A temporal shift. Dimensions are always moving—shifting like waves. It’s—” He broke off and went for the kitchen table, beckoning for Craig to follow. He did, still trying to wrap his head around the difference between the two phrases. Nithael ripped off a half-full sheet of calculations, then snatched up the pen. He drew two squiggles—like the sine waves Craig remembered from math class. They overlapped in some places but were opposite in others. “This is a single shift from one to the other. Imagine more shifts. More correspondences or differences. *Greater* differences.”

Craig squinted, trying to imagine more sine waves on the page, and trying to make that match up with autumn leaves in spring. “Okay, so?”

Nithael stared at him expectantly for a few more seconds. Then he said, “Time is a *field*. I brought *time* with me. The leaves were shift-remnants, probably from a plus-one or plus-two dimension.”

“So... what season was it when—or should I say *where*—you left home?”

Nithael opened his mouth to answer—and then blinked, his smile disappearing. “I’ve no idea,” he answered, sounding mildly distressed.

Right. Amnesia. Okay. “Well, *somewhere*—or *somewhen*—it was fall, so... well done.” Craig tried to smile encouragingly at Nithael, but that had never been his strong suit, except when trying to ease a wounded soldier’s fears. “You hungry? I can scrounge up some lunch...”

“Actually, yes.” Nithael frowned as if unhappy about that. “I suppose it’s redundant to say I can’t recall when I last ate. No meat or animal”—he twitched his hand, frowning even more—“parts? Products?”

Craig had called it. Totally vegan. “I’ll see what I can do. Might be PB and J, though...”

Nithael blinked at him. “Is that food?”

“Peanut butter and jelly.”

“Isn’t butter from cows?”

“This butter is from peanuts. They grow in the ground.”

“Not animals, then. That’d be fine,” Nithael said, and sat back down. He got rid of the page with the sine-like waves, then picked up his pen. “Caffeine, too.”

“Yep. On it.” Craig wondered if he couldn’t cobble together some sort of French press or large pour-over setup to make more coffee at one time, as he checked the bread box. He caught sight of Nithael’s mug when he turned to head to the fridge and returned it to the kitchen table, just within reach of Nithael’s right hand. It was like keeping track of a six-year-old’s teddy bear. “Found it.”

“Hmm?” Nithael picked up the mug, this time left-handed, and continued writing.

Craig chuckled at the combination of absent-mindedness and focus in his guest, and he murmured, more to himself than anything, “Never mind.” He went back to assembling sandwich ingredients and let the little genius work undisturbed.

“I think I know what happened,” Nithael said when Craig brought two plates to the kitchen table. The spread of paper had grown to encompass the entire surface, burying the laptop. Around the edges, the writing changed from neat columns to longer scrawls, some circled or underlined. Nothing, Craig noticed, was actually crossed out.

“Great. What?” Craig had no hope of being able to understand any sort of explanation, but he could probably just look interested and nod his head, and it would make Nithael happy.

“When we come here, we do it in steps. One shift at a time.” Nithael picked up the sandwich, then peeled the top slice of bread away to examine the peanut butter and jelly layers. “If you go through too many shifts in one step, you take... Well, here. This is almost perfect.” He spread the sandwich open on his plate, then put his finger down on the slice with the jelly. When he dragged his fingertip across it to the other slice, he left streaks of jelly through the peanut butter. When he lifted his finger, it was a mess. “Remnants,” he explained, before he stuck his finger in his mouth and licked it clean. “Not bad.”

Not at all...

Craig shook his head to banish the image of Nithael's cheeks hollowing out with his lips around his finger, so he could focus on the first explanation that had actually made sense to him. “So did the leaves come from your ‘shift’?”

Nithael smiled at him. “Yes. Exactly. They're a remnant from plus-one or plus-two. Probably plus-two, if home's position on the ‘wave’”—he pointed at where he'd left the sine-waves almost completely buried under other pages—“is seasonally shifted from Earth. I don't know anyone else who's studying temporal correspondence, so it's not as if there's a horologist I can consult. Not until I refine the science, at least.”

Something in Nithael's face made Craig ask the question, “Is that what you do at home? Study this sort of thing? Or was this teleportation for some other purpose than an experiment? Vacation, maybe?” How was this his life that he was having this conversation? Less than a month ago he'd been in the desert doing helicopter evacs of wounded soldiers. Retirement wasn't supposed to look like this—at least, not in any of the brochures.

“I don't take vacations. There's too much work to be done,” Nithael said airily, swiping up more peanut butter and jelly on his finger. “And I *wouldn't* just spontaneously decide to teleport to Earth. If nothing else, the difficulty of returning without a machine-assist makes a fixed time schedule problematic. I can't just abandon my work on a whim, so whatever I'm doing here, it must be critical. *More* important than my work...” He frowned, eyes distant, and scraped his teeth over his finger.

Looking down at his plate was the only way Craig could keep his face from heating up. Nithael's mouth was exasperating when stuff came out of it, but sinful when things went in. He took a bite of his sandwich to give himself time to sound normal when he spoke. “How does one return without a machine-assist, then?”

“First, find a portal—a naturally thin spot. Second, calculate the time for a convergence. A three-step convergence is the most efficient, though not without its side effects,” Nithael said, gesturing at himself. “Then it’s just a matter of realigning the energy between the dimensions and physically transitioning through.” He frowned, head tipping to one side as he studied Craig curiously. “Magic? That could be what you’d call it. Nonphysical manipulation of energy fields?”

Craig raised his eyebrows and turned the corners of his mouth down as he nodded and shrugged, his mouth too busy chewing a bite of sandwich to agree with Nithael’s assessment. He swallowed, then added, “Yeah, except most people nowadays are assholes and would call it woo-woo...”

He didn’t know how to *manipulate* energy, but he was able to feel when there was a change in the air. After one too many incidents of having “bad feelings,” enough people had accused him of being so new-age-y that he’d stopped giving open warnings. That sort of thing felt to people like the modern equivalent of magic.

Nithael stared at Craig for a few seconds of silence. “Woo woo?” he asked, pronouncing it carefully. With his quasi-British accent, it came out delightfully precise.

Craig tried not to smile. “Um, it’s a term people use as a dismissive catchall for events outside of the logical or everyday. Stuff that’s difficult to have any hard evidence for. So, any sort of energy work or paranormal activity, from Reiki to telekinesis. My...” He shook his head. No need to mention his special brand of weirdness. “Nobody believes in magic anymore.”

“Just as well. It’s an inaccurate description. I’m afraid I don’t have an *accurate* one, though. Teleportation equipment simply replicates the effects of, well, magic.” He waved a hand in the direction of the docked iPod. “Just like that equipment replicates the effects of speech.”

“That does music more than speech, but yeah. Okay.” Craig thought about turning it on for background noise, but figured Nithael needed to concentrate. “So, how do you find a portal to bend to your magical will? Or is there one just hanging out in West Hills County Park?”

Nithael blinked a couple of times. “I’ve no idea, actually,” he admitted. Then he shrugged and went back to eating his sandwich, one finger-swipe at a time. “I’ll build a detection algorithm after I’m done calculating the time-shift.”

“How close are you to finishing that?” Craig was sure that he should be more excited about meeting a visitor from another... something, but he was stumbling on the idea of sharing his home with a stranger for any length of time past an afternoon. He wasn't really set up to host someone. Not in the way of having enough places to sleep and having food to cook, but more in his temperament. It wasn't part of his skill set. He was used to being around others, but not the one in charge. Not until there was an emergency. And the thing he'd been looking forward to most about living in his family's empty house was the solitude. Having to revise his expectations for a bit was going to make him itch.

“Mmm, no idea.” Nithael frowned at his papers. “A few days? More, perhaps? This is the first *actual* evidence of a time-shift, you know. I'm the only one qualified to analyze this sort of thing. The fact that I *experienced* it is a fortunate coincidence, though not necessary for the calculation—at least not until I recall the specifics.”

Right. Shit. “I take it you'll need a place to stay? No relatives on Earth? No friends from the last time you visited?” A guy could hope...

“Not in my direct bloodline—” Nithael shot Craig a curious look. “What makes you think I've ever been here? This sort of trip takes far too much time to arrange, you know. And *why*?”

Craig gaped at Nithael for a moment and tried not to take his tone of voice personally. Besides, he had no idea what Nithael's home city was like. It could be a thousand times better than living on Earth. “I... You said something about ‘when we come here,’ like it's done all the time. I don't know. And why *not*?”

Nithael gestured at the papers all over the table. “I'm busy. I don't even like leaving the lab—certainly not for a pleasure jaunt. I leave that to the others. They occasionally bring back holos. And we pick up your television broadcasts.”

Hollows? Craig shook his head. He was sick of being one step behind everything that was said and didn't even want to ask. “You still don't know that this *was* a pleasure jaunt. Just 'cause you can't remember why you did so much shifting to get here doesn't mean there wasn't a very good reason.” He *hoped* there was a reason that he was being turned into the proprietor of a bed and breakfast without his consent. Though he had to admit the view had improved with the addition of such a pretty boy.

“True... I *never* do anything without a good reason,” Nithael said without even cracking a smile. “It would've been more efficient if I'd done single-

shifts, though, so I could at least have brought a proper tablet with me, explaining *why* I'd teleported all this way."

"Maybe that part was an acc—unplanned? I mean, maybe you don't use teleporters just to go to the store, but..." Craig decided at the last moment not to imply incompetence on Nithael's part, so as not to offend.

"I don't teleport at all. It's an admirably efficient mode of transport, but I don't—" He paused, head tipping to the side. Again, he tried to brush his hair out of his eyes, and again, he failed. "I *do* have one in my lab, though. Strictly for research purposes and deliveries. I've used it on occasion for onsite consultations or conferences. I must have teleported *from* my lab, which guarantees that it was intentional. And planned."

"Yes, but if you'd planned to come all this way, you would have been prepared. With a tablet, like you said. So maybe... Never mind." Craig shut up. Why did he think he could argue with someone from another world about how their technology worked? He dumped his plate in the sink and walked over to the doorway to the living room. "I'll leave you to your work."

"I'll need more—"

"Caffeine. Yeah. Wait your turn. Or make do with tea." Craig had started the most recent pot of coffee brewing before he'd sat down to eat, and it was meant to be his.

Over a lifetime in the army, Craig thought he'd seen just about everything, until now. Once Nithael ran out of table space, his papers migrated to the chairs, then the floor. He was down to the last few sheets on the pad and showed no sign of stopping.

After grabbing a ream of printer paper from the office and dropping it on the counter, Craig filled his coffee mug and took it out to the backyard to join the cat in a patch of sun. He needed space. And air. And something to look at which wasn't a too-intelligent, too-beautiful face that didn't make a lick of sense. He sprawled on his back to watch the clouds pass by, but Cat had clearly missed having his attention and sat on his chest to sniff at his mouth in a where-have-you-been-and-what-have-you-been-eating sort of way.

She was a slender orange tabby with white paws that sort of just showed up at the house, and Craig had assumed she was his parents' new adopted stray, but they swore she only came around about once a week to whine for food and

rub at their legs. Yet when Craig moved in, she had practically done so as well, claiming the house as her territory and wanting all the attention he could give her. He'd tried to respect her independent nature and didn't let her in the house for fear of trapping her there, but that had only worked for about a day. In less than a week, she had managed to wrap him around her little paw such that she slept at the foot of his bed and had become his alarm clock.

For an indoor-outdoor cat, she was surprisingly clean and smelled only faintly of horse. She actually spent a lot of her time in Flower's pen, or even sleeping on the pony's back. At first, Craig had been terrified that she'd get kicked or crushed under a hoof, but the pony tolerated the cat far more than he tolerated anyone else, human or not.

Now, though, as Craig closed his eyes and relaxed under her warm weight, he smelled an acrid, familiar odor under the faint tinge of horse, as if Cat had been near a barbecue or fireplace. But no, it wasn't wood smoke or charcoal briquettes or even propane. It was *electric*—the smell of shorted wires and burning insulation and melting copper.

Red and orange swept through his vision, a flash of insight that spiked right through his brain. He could hear the crackle of flames licking up over the kitchen cabinets. He could smell the bubbling paint and peeling wallpaper as the glue melted and spread flames across the walls.

He barely managed to grab hold of Cat to keep her from falling as he jolted up onto his feet. He let her jump down indignantly then ran to the back door. He paused for a second with the knob in his hand as it came clear to him that what he'd seen and felt hadn't happened yet. Knowing from experience that didn't mean he had time to lose, he held his breath and threw the door open.

"Buggering fuck!" Nithael shouted in surprise. He was on all fours on top of the carpet of papers, now a mix of yellow and white, spread across the floor. It looked like his equations had started crossing multiple sheets. He sat back on his heels, staring up at Craig with wide, startled eyes. "What?"

Craig looked from Nithael to the kitchen counter where the appliances—and therefore potential electrical fires—lived. Nothing was disassembled or even on. The microwave hadn't even merited a second glance from Nithael, so Craig turned back and said, "Don't touch the coffee maker."

"But..." Nithael looked at the coffee maker, then up at Craig, a sad, almost needy expression on his face. "Why? I asked for more, but you never answered."

The plaintive voice and puppy-dog eyes were a heady combination of adorable and guilt-trippy, and Craig almost gave in, but the stench of burning plastic still seared his nostrils. "I'll teach you how to use it, but don't do anything else with or to it."

Nithael got to his feet and walked on his toes to keep from disturbing the papers too much. "I can determine the function of any electronic device, remember?" he asked, holding up his tattooed right arm. "And it's a caffeine extractor. The only thing it actually *does* is heat water and somehow force it against gravity so it falls through the brown bits."

"Fine, yeah. Here. Watch me do it. Just don't mess with the functionality of it, or anything. I don't want a kitchen fire." Craig moved to the coffee maker and pulled out the basket.

Nithael followed him closely enough that he bumped into Craig at the sink. "But I could improve the efficiency. And the capacity—" He cut off. "That's not a synth."

"Don't you dare..." Craig looked up to follow Nithael's gaze to the countertop next to the back door. "No, that's Cat."

"It's a *living* cat." Fascinated, Nithael walked over to the cat, who sat down, tail curled primly over her toes. "Look at that. It's *real*."

"Of course it is. What on Earth do you have where you live, if not living animals?" Craig stopped in the middle of his now-automatic refilling of the coffee maker to watch Nithael's hand reach tentatively towards Cat.

"That's the problem. We *only* have synths..." Nithael said softly. He trailed off with a quiet gasp as his fingertips brushed Cat's head. Cat responded, not by taking Nithael's hand off at the wrist but by head-butting. Startled, Nithael jerked back, asking, "What? Is it hurt?"

Craig frowned, confused. He was pretty sure Cat didn't care about humans besides him for more than food distribution. "No, she likes you. She's asking for you to pet her." He moved behind Nithael and reached past him, offering his fingers for Cat to sniff. She didn't deign to stretch out her neck, so he had to step even closer, leaving a bare inch of space between his body and Nithael's. "Like this. Let her sniff your hand, then scratch her under the chin."

Tentatively holding out his hand again, Nithael asked, "Have you programmed her at all? Taught? Trained? What do you do with *living* creatures?"

“Cats train humans, not the other way around. She just showed up and claimed me as hers. I have no idea why, since she couldn't care less about my parents.”

“It's most likely your energy field,” Nithael said, watching as Cat rubbed her head on both their hands, moving seamlessly from one to the other. “If this cat is genetically related to the ones in our history, then she can sense your energy manipulation abilities.” He turned and looked up over his shoulder at Craig. “Your ‘magic’?”

Craig stopped and pulled away slightly from both Cat and Nithael. “I don't...” He hadn't talked about his ability yet. In fact, he'd made it a point not to, with anyone. But even with Nithael bringing it up on his own, Craig certainly didn't think of it as “energy manipulation.” “I'm not magic. I just... see things sometimes.”

Nithael didn't even blink. He went back to examining the cat, touching her with tentative little pokes, and asked, “In what shift? Spatial? Temporal?”

How to even answer that? Craig hadn't ever thought about his gift—as Gramps called it—in scientific terms. “Ah... I guess temporal? Yeah. I see stuff in my immediate vicinity, but in the near future. Like potential kitchen fires.” He went back to refilling and resetting the coffee maker, to have something to do with his hands, since Cat was busy with Nithael. And vice versa.

“You were checking on me?” Nithael asked, sounding hurt.

“What? No! The vision just came to me while Cat was sitting on my chest. I don't know. I can't really control it. Not unless I concentrate very hard for a long time.” He'd made a habit of meditating before a mission in the desert to see if any warnings cropped up before heading out, but he'd never felt he had any true grasp of it.

“Really?” Nithael turned and leaned against the counter. Cat stood up to bash her head into his arm. “Why is that? Is it a choice, lack of practice, or a true inability? Energy manipulation *should* be effortless. In cases when it isn't, there's often an underlying cause. I've made a study of such things. I'm something—”

“Of an expert? Of course you are.” Craig raised one eyebrow and smirked at his resident genius. “I dunno what it is. My grandfather tried to teach me the basics when the visions first started, but I've never gotten used to them like he did.”

“Did you have a bad experience in your formative years?”

Craig looked away from the coffee pot again, just in time to see Nithael hesitantly trying to fit his hands around Cat's body as if to lift her. He finally settled on one hand on her belly, the other under her tail, and all Craig could imagine was her shredding that tattooed skin.

"Here, um... Can I help? What are you trying to do?" Craig reached out and took Cat from Nithael's hands. Cat seemed strangely tolerant of them both, and she curled up contently against Craig's chest instead of trying to bleed him out in one swipe.

"You said"—Nithael sat down on the floor, then stretched out on his back—"she was on your chest. Here, pass her over. Perhaps she'll open up to me then."

Somehow that made sense, though Craig wasn't sure if Nithael wanted Cat to like him or to give him a vision. If it was the latter, that was oddly exciting. To have someone else besides Grampa Ellis who knew how this whole thing worked—that would be, well... something Craig had wanted for as long as he could remember.

He crouched down next to Nithael and gentled Cat from where she'd curled up in the crook of his arm to Nithael's chest and stroked down her back a couple times, from between her ears to the tip of her tail. She sat, then settled in a sphinx-like position. Nithael folded his arms behind his head so he could watch her comfortably.

"Is that your path, then? Foresight?" Nithael asked, never looking away from Cat.

"There are paths?" The question slipped out before Craig could censor himself. He was pretty sure he just managed to sound completely ignorant of his own ability.

Nithael looked up at Craig, brows raised in surprise. Without his hair falling in his face, he looked years older, with sculpted cheekbones and elegantly arched brows. "Certainly. I don't have even a touch of *any* sight. What I do is closer to psychometry, though less forensically diagnostic and more *functionally* useful. A shame, really. I could use aetheric or electromagnetic sight. If I want to pick up fields, I have to use touch," he said, lifting his right hand and wiggling his fingers.

Before he could stop himself, Craig had reached out to touch Nithael's hand. Which was idiotic, because he was sure it didn't work that way. His nano-whatever tattoo ink was for machines, not people. "You can't..."

He fell silent, watching as Nithael's hand turned black, and he nearly jerked his hand back, but there was no instinct—no silent warning scratching at the back of his head. No *foresight*. All he felt was an electric tingling wherever Nithael's skin touched his own.

"You..." Nithael blinked a couple of times, and his fingers slipped over Craig's skin, tracing the hollows between his knuckles. "You don't even have a biostabilization system?"

"Ah..." Craig had to clear his throat to respond. "I don't really know what that entails. What else can you feel?" His fingers twitched to hold on to Nithael's hand, but he let it roam freely over his skin.

"Temperature, elasticity, a hint of strength, heart rate—a hint of electrical feedback from an entirely natural nervous system," he added wonderingly as he smiled up at Craig. "You're completely biological, aren't you?"

"Yeah, is that weird? Most earthlings are..." That whole response felt strange to say, but the word earthling almost made Craig chuckle. Except now he was self-conscious and wondering what non-biological modifications Nithael had, besides the nanosensor tattoo thing.

"Oh. Yes, of course," Nithael said thoughtfully. He let his head fall back, though he didn't stop stroking his fingertips over Craig's arm. It felt good, but was disconcerting to watch, with his fingers so deeply black that Craig couldn't distinguish his fingernails from his skin. "I hadn't thought... But then... *Oh*," he breathed, hazel eyes lighting up. "You *actually* do things like surgical procedures, don't you?"

Craig frowned. "As opposed to...?"

"Nanomedicine, of course."

Craig's confusion—and the furrow in his brow—deepened. "What the hell is that?"

"You don't even have nanos?" Nithael lifted his hand, and the tattoo slipped back up into decorative whorls over his forearm and up under his sleeve. "Microscopic constructs that operate as a swarm to perform preprogrammed functions under a variety of conditions. As a technomancer, naturally mine facilitate machine and circuit interface for operation, diagnostics, and general comprehension. It's how I was able to examine your music reproducer and other devices."

“And my body.” Craig rubbed his palm over the places Nithael had touched, mostly so he didn’t miss those fingers on his skin so badly. “But how is that medicine?”

“Not *my* nanos. I don’t do biological work. Too... squishy.” Nithael shuddered. “But other specialized nanos can be used to close wounds and remove irregularities. And biostabilization systems regulate standard functions, keeping them within acceptable parameters. That part is all very tidy,” he said approvingly.

Craig had a moment of wondering if Nithael wished he weren’t a biological entity at all. Which was so foreign to his entire way of being, he couldn’t even imagine why. Craig had been immersed in the physical, performing biological surgeries, and dealing with biological functions for his whole adult life. To want people to be more like computers in order to make them “tidy” was beyond his understanding. “Your world seems to like things tidy. Even the animals aren’t allowed to be animals.” He reached out to scratch Cat’s chin briefly, since she was still content to sit absolutely still on Nithael’s chest.

“Well, if we *had* them, they would be.” Slowly, Nithael lifted his hand to touch the fur between Cat’s ears. “Though you have to admit, certain modifications ensuring better health are just logical. What if a condition or incident caused you to suffer an arrhythmic heartbeat or a chemical imbalance?”

“That happens all the time. And we deal with it.” Craig shifted from a crouch to seated position, seeing as how they seemed to be stuck down on the floor as long as Cat didn’t move. “Our medicine treats the symptom when it occurs. It doesn’t preemptively eradicate a condition at the source.”

“It seems terribly inefficient. How do you have time to do anything useful? Or fun?”

“I guess many people don’t. And many other people spend their lives doing the useful work of treating diseases. I don’t even want to think of how my job would have been different if nanomedicine or whatever existed here.” Craig stopped himself from reaching out to pet Cat again, since he recognized it as actually being the desire to reach out towards Nithael for no good reason.

“Your job?” Nithael asked, taking over chin-scratching duties. Still, Cat made no move to slash open his hand. If anything, her purring went from an almost inaudible hum to a deep rumble.

Craig winced at having to explain something that probably sounded Neanderthal to Nithael. "Flight medic. In a war zone. Evacuation and treatment. Stabilization until the wounded arrived at a hospital. It was tough, gritty work. Definitely the opposite of tidy." He shook his head, whether at himself or Nithael, he didn't know.

"Did you use your foresight for that?"

"Only when there was time to check and see if we were flying into disaster. Or when something just *felt* wrong, and it took me over." Craig grinned, humorlessly. "I had a better-than-average record of bringing my crews home safe, so people stopped bristling at my strange warnings. They trusted me in the field, but tended to keep their distance at camp."

"It would be more useful if you learned how to control it." Nithael's eyes narrowed slightly, and he went from watching the cat to staring at Craig. "Would you be willing to try?"

Letting out a frustrated huff, Craig muttered, "I've been trying to control it my whole adult life. No one wants a psychic around. But it doesn't really listen to me."

Nithael frowned. "What?" he asked, sitting up—or starting to. Cat snapped into action, claws extending and digging into Nithael's chest, making him flinch and flatten himself on the floor again.

"What? It's not convenient to be struck with the image of your neighbor dying in a fiery car wreck while at the grocery store. You rush home to tell them not to go out, and they get mad and look at you funny. It's a no-win situation." Craig couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. It made him angry with himself, which didn't help calm him down.

"That's awful," Nithael said, and it actually sounded sincere. "Foreseers... No, they *wouldn't* be known here, would they?" he asked softly.

The idea of the larger society acknowledging his gift—he had promised Gramps to think of it that way, though it wasn't easy—was so foreign it almost made Craig scoff. Until he thought about what it would be like. No hiding, and no strange, mistrustful looks when he didn't. It made him take a ragged breath. "No. We've always thought it was better that way." Now he wasn't so sure.

"It's denying a part of yourself. Like... like deciding you can't walk or control electricity or create energy fields." Nithael shook his head and again

went from petting the cat to petting Craig, a seemingly unconscious, casual brush of his fingers against Craig's hand. "It's not natural."

"Most people here would say that part of me is what's not natural." Craig's fingers itched again to hold on, but even though the hand hadn't gone black this time, he didn't think it was fair to call attention to the touch.

"Yes, well, most people are idiots." Nithael shrugged, looking back at the cat. "What I don't understand is how you've controlled yourself this long without a burnout."

Craig watched Nithael's face as he watched Cat. "Burnout? Like, when it's strong enough that I blackout and wake up in a different location with a migraine and a bone-deep thirst?"

Nithael's eyes went wide, and he sat up, dumping Cat into his lap. She yowled in protest and dug in her claws, but Nithael just held her at bay with one hand as he said, "Yes. Exactly. You *have* felt it, then?"

"Felt it surge so hot through me, I felt hollowed out after? Yeah. They were all like that at the start. Mom thought I was epileptic. Grampa Ellis helped me learn to sort of ride them out, but they still come strong like that once in a while, if I've been ignoring them."

"To start with, you *shouldn't* ignore them," Nithael scolded, grasping Craig's hand. "If you could learn to *invoke* them when necessary... There's a constant buildup of energy simply because you *are* a foreseer. If you don't bleed it off, the pressure becomes too great. That visualization may help you, in fact. It's helped others."

Craig thought about how the "burnouts" hadn't been as frequent in the desert, when he'd been trying to use the gift to keep his crews safe. What Nithael said made sense. He had to admit anything was worth a shot if it meant not losing control like that. "Well, maybe I'll have a chance to sort of figure that out a bit while you're here. I've already had two events since you showed up."

"Just two? That's—" Nithael let go of Craig's hand and made a shooing motion at Cat. When she didn't take the hint, Craig lifted her off Nithael's legs. Nithael scrambled up to his feet and crossed the sea of papers, scattering his carefully placed sheets without pause. "That's far too infrequent. Do you feel any... I don't have the words. Is anything physically abnormal?"

Craig wasn't sure if he should mention the tingling sensation that he'd felt when Nithael's black tattoo had touched him, but figured that was probably a

normal nanosensor reaction, so he didn't. "Not really? I mean, my vision went wonky with the first one—or maybe all the lights went too bright. I'm not sure. And as long as you don't fuck with the electronics, I won't have electric fires taking over my senses."

"Still, best to be safe. I should be able to extrapolate your strength—Where's the pen?" Nithael asked, looking around at the table as if he'd completely forgotten he'd moved to the floor earlier.

"You're practically standing on it." Craig didn't think it was safe to walk across the sea of papers, so he pointed at Nithael's feet where the pen had rolled along the paper as it crumpled underfoot.

Nithael blinked at it. "Oh." Genuinely puzzled, he bent down, picked up the pen, then went for the dwindling stack of paper on the table. "Two incidents aren't statistically significant in terms of future predictions, but I should be able to determine *something*. I'll need details. And you probably have no way to quantify the incidents in any useful terminology, do you?"

It was Craig's turn to blink. "Like a scale from one to ten? No." He skirted the papers to face Nithael more fully. "But the first one wasn't even really a vision. Just a... I don't know. A weird anomaly. I don't usually affect my surroundings."

"An anomaly?" Nithael asked, his carefully casual tone at odds with the way his eyes had lit up.

Why did Craig feel like maybe he should back away slowly? "Well, something new, at least. Might happen again, for all we know. When random portals open and spit out pretty young men from other worlds, who knows what shifts will happen?"

That got him another baffled look. "When random pretty what?"

Oops. That was a dumb move. Craig didn't mean to hit on the stranger with no social skills who was stuck under his roof for who knew how long. That was a surefire way to make everyone uncomfortable. "Nothing. I just haven't had two in a day since I was going through puberty."

"It's—We should—Perhaps residual energy from the teleport," Nithael said in a rush of words, turning his attention back to the papers scattered over the table, though Craig suspected he wasn't actually reading any of the equations. "I can—I can figure something out," he finished weakly.

Shit. Time to make an exit.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” Craig nodded respectfully and went back outside to be reunited with his coffee cup that he’d abandoned on the grass in the sun.

Hopefully he could find his balance with Nithael. Having another person in the house was enough to get used to; adding an awkward attraction element was only going to make this whole process a lot more difficult. Granted he wasn’t the one who’d been naked for their first twenty minutes of knowing each other, without a hint of wanting to change that predicament, but who knew what social mores Nithael had grown up with around nudity and intimacy? Maybe there wasn’t as much of a taboo on nakedness in the *Cathair*, or whatever he’d said his home was called. Nithael had seemed okay with it, so Craig wasn’t going to make a big deal about it.

It had just been a while since he was so intimately acquainted with another man’s body. Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell had wreaked havoc with his sex life until its repeal. Or, well, it had just skewed the results toward the female end of the gender spectrum, which hadn’t been his focus before going into the military. And then, when everyone started to realize how spooky-accurate he was with his disaster predictions, he became somewhat of a *persona non grata* when it came to any sort of relationship beyond a working one.

He’d gone without in the presence of attractive folks for so long now, he could easily continue to do so for a bit longer. It just seemed unfair that he had to in his own home.

Let it go, Craig. Think about something else.

Chapter 3

Craig had thought returning to his childhood home would help him to relax, but he was still too close to his military life. Too accustomed to sleeping in the dirt or on cots or thin mattresses, bunking down for two hours at a shot between crises. Coming home had just heightened his disconnect with the civilian world. The old house was too quiet, his old bed was too soft, and everything was too... *safe*.

So when he heard a *hiss* and felt a spray of cold water rain down on him, he found himself reaching for a sidearm that wasn't there and rolling to a crouching position before his eyes were all the way open.

He stopped still when he registered where he was—in a grassy patch of afternoon sunlight in the backyard, getting soaked by the sprinkler system. He'd forgotten his parents had installed one of those. And he definitely didn't know how to turn it off. As far as he'd noticed, the sprinkler's timer was set for just before morning. He stayed motionless for a little longer to assess his physical and mental states—heart rate and breathing fast and hard but stable as the sear of adrenaline ebbed, vision sharp and foresight quiet, mind still a mile a minute trying to figure out how this happened and what it meant.

He rolled his shoulders and let his soldier readiness fall away, then finally got himself out of the spray radius and headed back to the house. If Nithael had been messing with the sprinkler controls, Craig might be in for some other unpleasant surprises.

But Nithael looked like he hadn't moved from his calculations, except to start flipping pages over, having apparently run out of fresh sheets. The more recent scribbles seemed messier; some of the pages had nothing but giant circles or arrows pointing from one sheet to another.

Absorbed in his work, he didn't even look up or react to Craig's entry at all. Only Cat noticed, cracking her eyes open to regard Craig from where she was perched on the back of Nithael's chair, balanced partially against his hunched shoulders.

Well, maybe the next few days were going to be more like living alone than Craig had expected. He went through to the bathroom to grab a towel before trying to break such focus. He stood in the doorway, rubbing his hair dry, and caught himself staring at Nithael's eyes as they flicked from page to page. They

were a gorgeous color and held such intelligence and the thick lashes in profile were devastatingly lush. When Craig finally spoke, he had to clear his throat before asking, "You didn't, by chance, decide to turn on the sprinkler system?"

"Sprinkler system?" Nithael asked absently, without looking up. "Caffeine, though."

"You know how to make it; I showed you." He stepped closer to the table, keeping his wet feet off the pages strewn across the floor, and leaned down to try to get into Nithael's line of sight. "Sprinkler. It waters the lawn."

Nithael gave Craig his baffled-but-adorable frown. "Lawn. Grass?"

Craig sighed, but kept his focus, hoping to hold on to Nithael's. "Yes. Outside."

"Sprinklers. Clever," Nithael said, frown melting into a smile. "Did you design the system?"

"No, I just got drenched by it. Turned on randomly, Nithael." Craig raised his eyebrows meaningfully, since it was clear Nithael hadn't touched anything but paper and pen since he left. That meant only one thing.

"You should fix that." Nithael shot a meaningful look at the coffee pot, then turned his big, hopeful hazel eyes back on Craig. "Caffeine might help."

Wiping his hand down his face, Craig huffed dramatically, then gave up and moved toward the coffee maker. "It's not broken. I did it in my sleep."

"You *fixed*—Oh."

Craig heard a click, and when he looked back, he saw Nithael had put down the pen. That was a minor victory.

"I dozed off in the sun and woke up getting wet." Craig glanced out the window to confirm his suspicion. "And now it's turned off again. I don't know how I'm doing it."

"You need to learn to control—Wait. You're a fore—" Nithael shoved his chair back, then let out a sharp "Ow!" when Cat reacted with claws and hissing and an abrupt leap onto the counter.

Craig paused his coffee prep to open the back door so Cat could exit in a snit. If she was going to stick around, he might have to install a cat door. "This shit is new. I don't understand this whole manipulating the environment thing. I just see stuff. Unless *you're* doing it?"

“No... It *sounds* like you're experiencing a resonant secondary effect, but that doesn't make sense. Unless someone else nearby has an atypical talent?” Nithael asked thoughtfully. “I know such things aren't common, in this dimension.”

“*Everything* is atypical in this—” Dimension. They really were talking about alternate universe sorts of things. Not just space travel. God dammit. “Maybe I should check with Gramps.”

“‘Gramps’?”

Shaking his head at himself, Craig smiled. “Grampa Ellis. The other seer in the family.”

Nithael stood up, scattering pages he'd dropped next to his chair, and walked across the papers to the coffee maker. “From your phone. Also a seer? That implies your foresight is hereditary, not a genetic anomaly. Which of your ancestors is from the *Cathair*?”

What?

Craig froze. That was an absurd question. There was no answer to that question, and Craig shouldn't have been able to come up with one. There was no way any of his ancestors were from another dimension. Craig didn't even know if Nithael's people were human. But Grampa Ellis's voice from earlier rang in his head. The description of his vision started to make some logical sense, which was disturbing enough on its own, let alone the fact that it held the answer. “Great-grandad Ciaran?”

Nithael just nodded as if unsurprised. “That makes much more sense than spontaneously developing such a detailed ability. The earliest settlers of the *Cathair* needed group workings to create an effect like that, with one of them as the focus of the others' power. You must be genetically predisposed for it. But that... At your age? But *why*?” he muttered to himself.

Craig could see the now-familiar symptoms of Nithael's mind wandering off on a tangent. “Stay with me here, kiddo.” He took hold of Nithael's arm as if physically keeping him in place would help ground his thoughts. Again, the tattoo felt like it buzzed under Craig's hand. “Or at least take me with you.”

“Genetic predisposition to various recognizable, distinct paths, as opposed to a random genetic mutation that mimics, but isn't essentially a manifestation of a known ability,” Nithael explained in a rush of words. “That means that standard diagnostic procedures—ones I've developed or refined, as a part of my

studies—should work on you. It sounds like you're either caught in a destabilization cycle due to an external trauma or that you're imbalanced in a more fundamental way.”

“Well, thanks a lot.” Craig's skin prickled at words like *destabilization* and *imbalanced*. He'd worked hard for so long to stay in control. As he spoke, he tried—and failed—to keep from sounding offended. “Maybe I'm just three generations from the source and branching out.”

“Not unless you've had a constant infusion of other genetic material with different predisposition. But you only mentioned your grandfather and your great-grandfather. Statistically, all three of you share the same predisposition to foresight. Variations in your individual paths should all be related to sight, temporal shifts, or both.”

“Okay, fine. That makes... sense.” He couldn't quite believe it did, but yeah. Weird how not weird it was. “But what about my mom?”

“Does she have a quantifiable ability, or did it skip her generation? That happens frequently.”

“It must have skipped her. And Uncle Brennan.” Craig had never really admitted to himself that he had never wanted children because he didn't want to pass this down, but some part of him felt relief to hear it wasn't inevitable. “But what can you find with your ‘diagnostic procedures,’ exactly?” Craig stopped himself from adding, *And is there a way to stop it?*

“A great deal. It ties in with your inability to control your sight. You're obviously an adult, beyond the age when you should have learned control—” Nithael paused, head tipped to one side. “Can your grandfather control *his* sight?”

Craig tried to suppress his frustrated huff at once again having his lack of control shoved in his face. “Yes. And he tried to teach me, but I just never...” He grabbed Nithael's mug and filled it from the full coffee maker for something to distract from the ridiculous lump in his throat.

“Then... Well, there are a few remote possibilities,” Nithael said thoughtfully. “But let's rule out the basics first. Are you healthy?”

“I'm a soldier. Or, I was. Of course I'm healthy.” Craig set Nithael's mug down next to his elbow without too much force.

“No history of brain diseases, uncontrolled growths, convulsions, or hallucinations? No traumatic injuries?”

“Everyone’s family has someone with cancer. But no brain tumors. And no, I managed to see any potential traumatic injury situations ahead of time and avoided them.”

Nithael frowned. “It *could* be that the genetic inheritance broke down over the generations. Have you had your DNA analyzed?”

“Do you have any idea what that costs? Besides, I had no reason to until you showed up.” Craig was tempted to take a sip of Nithael’s coffee, since he was ignoring it for once. It would probably be helpful right about now.

Nithael glanced around the kitchen, muttering, “I suppose. Though I could probably modify something to be able to examine it, if it becomes necessary. I’ll need you to actually invoke a few visions, so I can time the onset, duration, and recovery. See if you’re within norms.”

“A vision, or a random manipulation of some mechanism in the house? I only know how to make the first one happen.”

“Actually, if we could make the *second* happen, that would give me a great deal more insight into how your power works. Secondary effects like that are extremely rare; most people have an affinity to *only* one path. Even my own focused tactile deterrence is considered by some—uneducated as they may be—to be a side-branch of my technomancy. Which is like saying heat and magnetism are related because they both affect certain metals.” Nithael didn’t actually roll his eyes, but Craig could see the desire.

He tried hard not to smirk as he spoke. “At the risk of sounding ‘uneducated,’ what is ‘focused tactile deterrence’?”

“This.” Nithael lifted his right hand, and the tattoo slithered down to his fingertips. When he brushed against Craig’s bare forearm, the touch stung just a little, less than a spark of static electricity.

“You do that *on purpose*? It’s not just a side effect?” Even though it stung, Craig couldn’t make himself pull away from Nithael’s touch.

“Well, I *can*. It’s somewhat necessary. Spreading it through the nanos diffuses the effect, but it requires contact with a biological neural system or a closed electrical circuit to actually work. I have to bleed off my excess energy periodically, or it builds to dangerous levels.” Nithael scowled. “I *thought* I’d solved the issue, but that must have happened temporally close to when I teleported. It’ll come back to me.”

"Is that like how I should let the visions come so they don't blow up in my face?" Craig wasn't sure he wanted to believe that theory, but anything was better than what Nithael called burnout.

"Something like that, yes. They *will* come. It's up to you to control how and when."

"Right. I can sort of do that with the visions, but I don't have any idea how the other shit works. I didn't even remember there was a sprinkler system." After a moment, Craig spoke a little softer and gestured to where Nithael was still touching his arm. "Is that helping?"

"What?" Nithael followed Craig's gaze. His fingers twitched, but he didn't pull away. "Oh. Actually, very much. At work, I have a basic luminescence circuit for this. I didn't realize a *person* would be more efficient. It's not disrupting you?"

"No, it's kind of nice. I mean, it makes my arm tingle, but that's fine." Craig looked up from Nithael's hand as the words 'luminescence circuit' registered. "Wait, does that mean you power your own light in your lab? Talk about off the grid."

Nithael shook his head. "Too inefficient. I need mobility. I limit it to while I'm at my station, through foot contact plates." He twitched his fingers again, petting Craig experimentally, then added, "My lab assistants avoid coming too close to me. Most people do. Otherwise I would've realized how well this works."

Craig frowned at that. "But it doesn't really hurt. Why do they stay away from you? That seems..." Lonely. Cold. Depressing. He shook his head, not able to say any of those options out loud.

"Oh, they don't actually *like* me."

"What? That's..." Craig almost pulled out of Nithael's grasp in his indignation, but at the last moment he kept contact. "Why do you keep them around, then? That seems... hard." He was proud that he hadn't said 'sad,' even though it was true.

Nithael blinked up at him in surprise. "It's a very prestigious position. And they're occasionally useful to have around, as long as they don't actually talk to me. I can't stand being interrupted while I'm working."

Craig furrowed his brow and almost mentioned how he'd just interrupted Nithael a few minutes ago to talk about sprinklers, but he let it go. "So you sting anyone who touches you. Does it matter where?"

"The nanos diffuse the effect over greater—" Nithael stopped and gave a quick shake of his head, eyes going distant. "You helped me walk here. You didn't feel anything?"

"I... To be honest, I don't remember. I was too focused on assessing whether you were injured or high or insane to notice if your skin was tingling." Craig smiled at Nithael in apology.

"You may just have an unreasonably high pain threshold. This"—he pressed his tattooed fingertips against Craig's arm—"doesn't hurt, even after prolonged exposure?"

"Well, the skin feels a little more sensitive where you've been touching it, like it's mildly sunburned, but I wouldn't call it *pain*, necessarily. Which I *do* feel. This just isn't that strong. Is that bad?"

As Nithael turned to face Craig more fully, the tattoo slipped back up his arm, leaving his skin and nails unnaturally light by comparison. He wrapped his hand around Craig's wrist, drawing light, small circles with his fingertips. "Does this hurt?"

"No?" Craig pulled his gaze away from the pale hand on his to look into Nithael's inquisitive eyes. "Why would it?"

"Most people avoid my touch, even without the nanos. Or they could just be avoiding *me*," Nithael added thoughtfully. "Of course, I avoid them just as much. Even a casual touch could damage my hands in some way, which would make my research significantly more challenging."

Craig reached with his free hand to take hold of Nithael's. He moved slowly and checked Nithael's face for any sign he should back off, but when he saw none, he grasped as if they were shaking hands, tightly enough that their palms pressed together. Without the nano-ink, Craig registered a slight vibration as of an energy field, sort of like the tactile equivalent of a quiet hum. It made touching Nithael feel that much more immediate and commanding of his attention. It felt good, and not at all painful. Not even close.

"There," Craig said quietly. "Not the end of the world, is it?"

"Why would it be? And *how*? There's not enough energy generated between us to take down the house, much less 'the world'—which encompasses what? The planet? The star system?"

The complete seriousness on Nithael's face made Craig laugh. He'd have to remember not to use too many idioms with his non-native English speaker. Or

maybe just with someone who didn't have enough interpersonal experience to recognize them. "I just meant, this is okay, right? Feels okay to you?"

Nithael shot Craig a suspicious glance as if wondering what happened to the world-destruction, but he let it pass in favor of nodding. "It does, yes, which makes very little sense. It's been a very long time since I tolerated even a few seconds of physical contact, without a clear need—such as you helping me walk."

"Does it normally hurt for you, too, then? Touch?" Just the idea of anyone having to live with that sort of pain hurt Craig to think about, let alone this lovely young man who clearly didn't deserve a curse like that.

"Oh, not at all. I just don't lightly tolerate prolonged association with the unintelligent. I loathe wasting time on explanations that would be unnecessary if people would just *learn*." Nithael wrinkled his nose again. "Reminds me of the one term I had to teach basic energy sensing to novices. Never again."

Craig didn't know if he should take that response as a compliment or just count himself as an anomaly. Either way, he couldn't keep himself from pushing the envelope just slightly. "How about just *one* novice, who is very eager to learn?" He dipped his head and raised their clasped hands until his lips lightly brushed Nithael's knuckles for the briefest moment.

Nithael's eyes widened. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its sharp edge. "I already asked if we were intimate, didn't I? I vaguely recall that."

"You did, yes." Craig let their hands fall back down, but didn't let go. "The answer was no."

"That's disappointing."

"Past tense."

"True, but most people speak casually, without precision. Your use of past tense could have been reflexive, not intentional," Nithael said, still in that same soft, wondering voice.

"I was talking about your grammar, not mine." Craig raised his eyes from their hands to Nithael's face where he saw nothing but complete surprise.

"The answer was—'Oh. I said, '*were* intimate,' didn't I?" Nithael laughed, fingers tightening against Craig's hand. "You're surprisingly clever."

"I'm gonna try to take that as a compliment." Craig smirked and took a step back, but Nithael followed. So much for creating distance. "Speaking of, you let me know if you wanna start using the future tense at some point."

"Why not present tense?"

"That would require actions, not words." Craig was strangely reluctant to make the first move. Whether that was to do with Nithael's apparent youth, his status as guest, the fact that he hadn't fully recovered his memory, or all of the above, Craig wasn't sure. He just knew he didn't want to press.

The slightest frown appeared. "What would be appropriate? It's been some time, and... Well, I don't associate with *people* much at all."

Craig raised his eyebrows as he considered an answer. Nithael's response was not one he'd anticipated, though by now it probably should have been. "Depends on what you want, I guess? Kissing's considered a good place to start..."

The frown disappeared as Nithael's shoulders relaxed. He leaned forward, then stopped, glancing down at their joined hands. "Where? Outside of fiction, I've no idea how things are done here. Your hand, as you did to me?"

Taking a moment to keep himself from saying "anywhere"—or worse, "everywhere"—Craig allowed himself to be charmed by Nithael's possibly unintentional courtliness. "Sure? If you want. How is it done where you're from?"

Nithael's frown came back. "I was never—Well, I never bothered," he said, looking down again. "I mean, I *have*, but it was incidental. Not intentional. People, you understand... There was a somewhat clever study partner towards the end of my studies. I enjoyed talking to her—she was outside my field of expertise, you understand. She had a fantastic talent for analyzing the processes of cellular regeneration. Top of her field, now."

"Kissing, Nithael. Focus on the question. Do your people kiss on the mouth?" Craig was starting to wonder if this was going to be worth the trouble of dealing with such a distractible, literal, scientific mind.

This time, Nithael actually sighed in relief. "So it *is* like in your movies," he said, crowding close to Craig, trapping their hands between their bodies, as he lifted his head. He had to raise up on his toes to touch his mouth to Craig's, lips slightly parted, just enough to feel the warmth of his breath.

It had been *so damned long*...

Craig didn't realize he'd let go of Nithael's hand until he felt stubble under his fingertips as they ran along Nithael's jaw to bury themselves in the shaggy hair at his nape. The mild, electric hum that Nithael's skin gave off was heightened when their mouths touched; the sensitivity of Craig's lips and tongue as they brushed against Nithael's lips registered a sharp sensation, even as they both were being gentle. It stole Craig's breath and made him press forward as he gasped for air.

Without breaking the kiss, Nithael said, "Oh, that's *very* good." He slid his arms around Craig's waist, fingers splayed, tugging at Craig's T-shirt. He touched his tongue to Craig's lower lip, briefly; then he did it again, licking slowly, luxuriously, as if tasting.

The shocking heat of Nithael's tongue and the unexpected compliment from his mouth both caused Craig's face to flush, and a white hot point of desire slid all the way down his spine. He hummed in agreement, opening his mouth to invite more exploration—an invitation Nithael didn't hesitate to seize. His fingers curled, nails scratching over Craig's shirt as he swept his tongue into Craig's mouth with a quiet, contented sigh. He shifted, easing one foot between Craig's, and the way he pressed his hip up against Craig's body had to be deliberate and knowing, despite how innocent he'd seemed.

Not wanting to lose that contact, Craig slid his free hand around Nithael's narrow hip to press against his back and keep him in place. Nithael made a quiet, needy sound, and Craig could feel him getting hard, even through their clothes. When Craig scraped his teeth lightly over Nithael's lower lip and the needy sound got louder, he couldn't keep from letting out a low growl.

His body wanted to crowd Nithael up against the counter, but his mind warned him not to be so aggressive. Nithael had just admitted he *didn't* do this—at least not often. And yet, his enthusiasm spiked Craig's interest and had him groping for ways to feel more of that slender body, short of stripping him naked.

It was Nithael who broke the kiss first, dropping back onto his heels as he stepped back, saying, "You're inconveniently—" When paper rustled underfoot, he looked down, then frowned as if surprised to see the floor covered with papers.

Craig touched Nithael's chin to gently raise it until he was making eye contact, in an attempt to keep him focused. "What, tall?"

"Yes. But I was calculating—"

He was so easily distracted. Craig bent down to kiss him lightly. When their eyes met again, Craig suggested, "Hop onto the counter, then."

Nithael grinned. "You don't mind? I think I did that before, but most people object, despite counters and tables being perfectly serviceable—"

"Don't mind. Get up there," Craig interrupted as he took hold of Nithael's hips to help guide him up. He weighed maybe a hundred forty pounds, if that.

"Very practical," Nithael said, spreading his legs so he could pull Craig close. He put his arms around Craig's shoulders and leaned in close, adding, "I like that."

In their new positions, Nithael was about an inch taller than Craig, so he had the rare experience of tilting his head up for a kiss. It was slow and soft, and Craig enjoyed the feeling of being surrounded by all of Nithael's limbs at once. "Mmm. Whatever you like."

"This," Nithael said, his lips feather-light against Craig's. His hands went from Craig's shoulders to his nape and back, as though exploring his body. "You should keep having good ideas like this."

"How about this?" Craig's hands slid from Nithael's hips, under the hem of his shirt, and ran up his sides to his back and over his shoulders. The slight, tingling current of his skin warmed Craig's palms and demanded his focus.

"Yes," Nithael breathed as he arched like a cat and let his head fall back, eyes closed. His neglected, somewhat awful haircut did nothing for the shape of his face; with his hair swept back, Craig could see just how beautiful he really was.

When his hands skimmed back down, following the curve of Nithael's spine, he remembered the tattooed stars. He brushed his lips down the side of Nithael's neck as he said, "Speaking of practical, is all the ink on your body functional?"

"By what definition"—Nithael's breath hitched when Craig reached the base of his throat—"of functional?"

Craig huffed a laugh and tugged on Nithael's shirt collar with his teeth. "I was thinking along the lines of diagnostic ability and idiot-deterrent but with you... What?" he asked, raising his voice to be heard over Nithael's laughter.

"Idiot—Idiot-deterrent," Nithael gasped out, burying his face against Craig's shoulder. "That's perfect. Why doesn't *anyone* else understand that sort of thing?"

Craig was at a loss. "I... That's basically what you called it, which made sense somehow..."

"My mother would *never* approve," Nithael said, still clinging to him and laughing in little hitches. "She's always saying I'm supposed to be *nice* to everyone, even when they're not intelligent enough to understand the most basic principles of energy manipulation."

Craig had a moment of worry that if Nithael ever actually tried to explain all that stuff to him, he'd have a hard time, which made him pause before he nudged for room to nip at Nithael's neck. "Nice is overrated. Come here."

"I'm going to make you put that in writing for her," Nithael murmured, sitting back for a proper kiss.

"I'll have my sister cross-stitch it on a sampler and frame it for her." Craig indulged in those plump, hot lips for a moment before sweeping his hands up Nithael's back again, gathering the shirt at his wrists, and tugging to get Nithael to raise his arms. "Here, lemme..."

Nithael ducked and let Craig pull off the shirt, saying, "I hate clothes. Not in a lab, of course, but that's a matter of safety. Otherwise, they're terribly inconvenient." As Craig dropped the shirt, Nithael shook out his hair and added, "You don't mind? Everyone else always complains."

Smiling at how stripping him could somehow distract Nithael from Craig's seemingly obvious intentions, he replied, "You being shirtless is necessary for my next good idea."

With a blink that seemed entirely guileless, Nithael asked, "Then why aren't you executing it?"

"Because you keep going on tangents," Craig mock-grumbled. Then he leaned down to kiss along Nithael's collarbone and brush a hand over one of his nipples.

Nithael arched his back again, pushing against Craig's hand, and combed his fingers through Craig's short hair. "I'm always working. Though I must admit, you're doing an admirable job at distracting me. You should also do that more."

Craig wasn't sure if Nithael meant for him to do more with his hand or his mouth, so he kept up with both. With his free hand he circled Nithael's hips and pulled them towards him until his pelvis was flush against Craig's. The contact made him grunt, and he bit down on Nithael's shoulder to keep from swearing.

“Trousers,” Nithael said raggedly, bending down to nip at Craig’s ear. “Or is it too soon? If it’s not, I’d rather enjoy feeling you everywhere.”

As soon as the words were out of Nithael’s mouth, Craig’s vision was obscured by a bright, vivid image of the two of them in bed, Nithael’s head thrown back in ecstasy, the electric hum of his skin resonating over every inch of Craig’s, the heady scent of sweat and come and saliva overtaking his nose. He gasped and felt Nithael’s mouth on his, stealing his breath, as the heat of their bodies pressed together caused his hips to rock and a deep groan to escape his throat. Every sensation was a potent drug laced with a bottomless desire for connection.

Then a sharp buzz of power skittered down his spine, and he heard a gasp—“*Oh!*”—that came from outside, not the depths of his mind, snapping him out of the vision. He blinked, struggling to focus, and saw Nithael staring at him, wide-eyed, pupils blown dark.

Craig found his voice. “What—”

“What—No, tell me later. Let’s *do* that first,” Nithael said breathlessly.

“Fuck. You *saw* that?” Craig was trying to catch his breath and get control of his thoughts again, and the headache was starting, but he *knew* that wasn’t how it was supposed to work.

“Some. Could be resonance from close physical proximity. I’ve never been intimate with a foreseer. Stop *talking* and”—Nithael gave a frustrated wave of his hand—“*do that*. You obviously have the experience.”

“Hang on, that’s not supposed to happen. Even Gramps and I can’t see *into* each other’s minds, and he and I have been close since I was born.”

“And I’m not a seer at all, nor is any sub-path of *sight* congruent to micro-field manipulation, but I *did* see it, and would very much like to *start*,” Nithael said with an impatient huff. “Because in my experience, limited though it may be, sex is *never* that... engaging.”

“A vision isn’t necessarily what happens in the future, you know...” Was it possible to give yourself performance anxiety? That was yet another new wrinkle. Craig finally focused on Nithael’s face and saw a disappointed pout. He nipped at the protruding lip and smiled reassuringly. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t try...”

Nithael grinned and clawed at Craig’s shirt, pulling and tugging and actually making it harder for Craig to help him get it off. “Where were we, in

the vision?" he asked, throwing the shirt aside. Papers rustled, but this time he didn't even blink. Apparently, he'd found his focus.

"In my bedroom. Upstairs, down the hall, past the—" Craig cut off with a grunt as Nithael pushed into him, sliding down his body as he dropped off the counter.

"Now," Nithael demanded, though he pressed the word into Craig's chest before he started kissing and licking anywhere he could reach.

Craig cupped the back of Nithael's head in his hand and kissed his forehead. "Water first, or the headache will get a lot worse." He extricated himself from Nithael and grabbed the closest coffee mug, tossing the contents and filling it from the tap.

"Headache?" Nithael asked, staring at Craig as if derailed from his path. "What headache? Why do you have a headache?"

"Strong visions like that leave a headache and a deep thirst in their wake. Grampa Ellis gets them, too." Craig was starting to have a hard time focusing his eyes, so he drained the mug and refilled it to drain it again.

Nithael crowded close behind Craig and rubbed his hands over Craig's shoulders. "Is there anything I can do? No, don't answer that. I'm terrible with biomanipulation."

"Your hands feel nice just like that..." Craig made himself be good and drink one more mug of water before he got distracted with Nithael's body and regretted it later.

"They do?" Nithael sounded surprised, though he kept petting.

"Yeah. They tingle. Like you've got electricity in your skin. Nice massage technique." Craig turned around and wrapped his arms around Nithael's waist, pulling him close. Nithael kept petting, leaving a trail of sensation beyond just body heat, as Craig leaned back against the sink.

"If I were doing it intentionally, I'd be happy to take credit, but I don't believe that I am." Nithael hesitated. "Doing it intentionally, that is. I suppose it could be—But why would it be continuous?" he muttered, getting that dangerous, faraway look in his eyes.

Craig kissed him on the nose to bring his focus back. "I like it, so you don't have to figure it out right now. Wouldn't you rather go upstairs?"

"Upstairs. Yes." Nithael huffed and stepped back, dragging his hands down to Craig's waistband. He hooked his fingers into the fabric and pulled

insistently. "No headache? I'd rather not stop, once we start. It looked incredibly engaging."

Having witnessed Nithael's single-minded focus already, Craig smiled at the thought of being its target. "Receding. Almost unnoticeable, especially when distracted."

Nithael hummed in approval and kept backing up, pulling Craig along with him. Pages scattered under their feet. "Even better. Perhaps we can prevent it altogether."

"Darling, you're—" Craig had to grab hold of Nithael's shoulders and shove him to the side before he bruised his backside from walking smack into the kitchen table. The push threw off his balance, and he slipped on a thick layer of papers, but Craig had a tight hold on him and kept him upright. "Here, let's..." Craig offered his arm, and when Nithael took hold, he guided them through the living room to the stairs.

"Have you considered—No, you don't have gravitic field manipulation devices," Nithael said, looking down as if enchanted by ordinary stairs. He went so far as to scuff one bare foot on the carpet runner before letting Craig lead him up. "It's very... solid?"

"Yep. Promise. And the bed you saw is up there."

Nithael smiled wickedly. "Excellent planning. I suspect you take lovers far more often than I do."

Craig's answering smile faded slightly. "What makes you say that?"

Nithael stopped in his tracks, a few feet away from the bedroom door. "Should I not have said it? It was just an observation. You haven't hesitated, even with the complication of an uncontrolled episode of foresight, and you seem to be comfortable and confident, implying you've done this before."

Apparently, Nithael had no idea how persuasive and insistent his enthusiasm was. Craig had been carried along by it, especially after the vision, happy to oblige him in attempting to carry out the act they both had seen. That, and it had been forever since he'd taken someone to bed with him. "'This' in the general sense, yes. Not 'this' as in 'try to recreate a vision with a visitor from another world.' I've never had a vision with sex in it before. Usually they're about death."

"That's... unpleasant. You should definitely try to do something about that."

“Well, they’ve helped avoid a lot of death, actually. So I’m kinda fine with it. Medic, remember?” Craig ushered Nithael into his bedroom before he remembered the massive pile of clean clothes on his bed.

“You mentioned that before. Why are you a medic, if your path is foresight?” Nithael asked, glancing around before he went right for the bed. He sat down, heedless of the socks and T-shirts under him. Then he got back up, hands going to the waistband of his borrowed sweatpants, and asked, “Off?”

“One sec.” Craig grabbed the corners of his comforter and bundled all the clothes up inside it, then shoved the whole thing into his closet. When he turned back to the bed, Nithael’s pants were already pooled at his feet. “Right. Okay.”

There was something serene about Nithael’s smile. He sat down, then stretched out on his back, without a hint of modesty or reticence. He held out a hand to beckon Craig, saying, “This is much more comfortable than a lab table.”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. If that was the expectation Craig had to exceed, he had no reason to worry. “I should hope so.” He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans, dropping them to the floor along with his boxers. Then he stepped over to take Nithael’s hand and let Nithael tug him down onto the bed.

“It’s also been some time since I’ve done this while not running a timed procedure or computation,” Nithael said, turning just enough to hook one foot over Craig’s legs, pinning their bodies together. “It’s relaxing to not be in a rush, isn’t it? Unless there’s something you need to do?”

Craig successfully suppressed his eye-roll, but couldn’t hide the grin. “Not a damned—” Then he caught a glimpse of the dark sky outside, and he pulled away, saying, “Cat. I let her outside earlier, and I usually feed her about this time. She’ll be crying at the door in a minute. I’ll be right back. Don’t move.” When Nithael nodded, Craig tugged at the bedsheet, saying, “Get under this so you don’t get cold.”

Nithael smiled. “I don’t get cold. But you’re very much a caretaker, aren’t you?” he asked, sitting up so he could get his legs under the sheet.

Craig shrugged. He’d forgotten about the bioregulation something or other. “Medic, remember? Be right back.” He kissed Nithael’s forehead and left the room.

Cat was already waiting for him outside, meowing for attention. She slipped in and jumped up onto the counter as soon as he opened the back door. He

scratched her chin and told her she was pretty until her purr was loud and deep, then filled her food bowl and refreshed her water. He pet her from ears to tail once, just to see her back rise in a wave to meet his hand as it traveled, and resisted the urge to ask her what the fuck he was doing with this stranger from—impossibly—another world.

He hadn't done something reckless like sleep with someone he'd just met since the first few times he was home on leave. Nithael didn't feel like an unknown entity for some bizarre reason, though. Or at least he seemed to understand Craig even better than himself.

He shook his head and watched Cat ignore him for another few moments, then headed back to the lure of skin that made him tingle and the vision's promise of a connection he'd been craving for far, far too long.

Chapter 4

Nithael had moved to the edge of the bed, so he could reach the old clock radio on the nightstand. Craig wasn't surprised to see the tattoo had crawled down to his fingertips—though what the nanos “read” from a clock radio that wasn't even set to the right time, he couldn't imagine.

“It's only a receiver?” Nithael asked. “That's its functionality, so it's not broken, but *why*? Why not have a transmit function as well?”

He was distracted again. They were both naked, fresh from the memory of an overwhelming, enticing vision, and Nithael's scientific mind still hadn't turned off. Craig might have been insulted, but he was coming to regard Nithael's quirks as adorable rather than irritating.

“The transmissions it receives aren't looking for a response. They're just entertainment.” He took Nithael's blackened hand from off the radio and brought the palm to his mouth to kiss it. A tiny spark of power burst against his lips, but it faded to a gentle tingle.

“Ah. And the blinking numbers?” Nithael asked, pulling his hand back an inch at a time, as if to make certain Craig followed. He did, allowing Nithael to draw him onto the bed, where he caged Nithael in with his limbs, knees on either side of Nithael's hips and elbows next to his shoulders. Their faces were inches apart.

“Timekeeping. Kiss me.”

Nithael lifted his head, and his eyes fell closed as their lips touched, then parted. “Why isn't this tedious, with you?” he asked between soft kisses.

Craig worked his way along Nithael's jaw to his ear. “What, kissing? If you've found it tedious before, someone's been doing it wrong.”

Nithael huffed, turning to the side to give Craig full access. “I can't be expected to be an expert in *everything*,” he complained.

“I'm not expecting anything, hon.” Craig nipped at Nithael's earlobe, then the corner of his jaw.

“But... your vision,” Nithael said, turning—or trying to. “Don't you want that?”

Craig pulled away just enough to make eye contact. “Sure. It's something to shoot for. But desire and expectation are very different, Nithael.”

“That doesn’t necessarily have to be true. Maintaining a clear, fixed purpose—a goal—helps to ensure focus and proper attention to detail.”

“Then pay attention.” Craig bit down on the neck muscle behind Nithael’s jaw, hard enough to make him catch his breath.

Nithael’s hands went up to Craig’s hair, tugging at the short strands. “I am. Do—Do that more.”

Growling in pleasure at the permission, Craig bit his way down Nithael’s neck and along the top of his shoulder, leaving a line of tooth marks, and ending just above his tattoo. Nithael scratched down Craig’s back, as far as he could reach, then back up. He kicked to get the sheet out from between their bodies, then wrapped one leg around Craig’s.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, trying to pull Craig’s body flush against his.

The feeling of all that bare skin full of charged energy pressed up against his took so much of Craig’s attention, he couldn’t answer right away—especially with how nicely their pelvises lined up at the moment. “Ah... Jesus, you feel good. Anything. Everything. Just... yeah. This.” He leaned down to kiss Nithael and rocked his hips forward slightly.

Nithael’s moan was definitely closer to a purr. He arched up, panting into the kiss, cock sliding and bumping against Craig’s until they lined up even better. “That’s—Do more—Yes,” Nithael said incoherently.

Craig agreed wholeheartedly, and he started to rock his hips in a slow rhythm. Nithael seemed to not have much more of a vocabulary around his desire than that command, but it didn’t bother Craig in the least. He was happy to do a whole lot more, as long as he got the green light.

The tingling energy radiating from Nithael’s skin sent waves of heat through Craig’s body, making his heart race, tightening his chest until he felt almost dizzy. He made himself take a deep breath before nosing through Nithael’s hair to suck on his earlobe. “Like this?”

He couldn’t quite tell if Nithael’s response was an affirmative hum, a moan, or another purr. Maybe all three. Nithael certainly didn’t try to pull away; he pushed up in rhythm with Craig’s movements, hands skimming up and down Craig’s body. A few times, he lifted his head to mouth at Craig’s shoulder, but then Craig would hit the right angle, and he’d drop back down on the pillow with another beautiful, pleased sound.

It wasn't until Craig's fingers wrapped around Nithael's arms that he realized he was touching the tattoo, *without* the electric sting of power. At least, not any more than the rest of his body seemed to give off constantly. Whether Nithael could turn it off at will or was too distracted or aroused for it to work, Craig had no idea. It made him want to press his mouth to the not-actually-inked skin, though, so he leaned over looking up at Nithael to check if it was safe.

Judging by the dazed look in Nithael's eyes, apparently his quick mind *did* have an off-switch. It took a couple of blinks before he asked, "What is it? What's wrong? Did I do something?"

"Nothing. Can I... kiss it?" Craig nodded toward the pattern on Nithael's arm.

Nithael's brow furrowed in confusion. "You—Well, yes. If you want, that is. It might—Or... not?" he muttered, lifting his arm to regard the tattoo.

Craig took the decorated biceps in his hand and brushed his lips over both dark and light patches on its skin. The black areas felt slightly warmer to him, especially when he licked them, but other than that, there was no difference from the rest of Nithael's energy-laced skin. It didn't hurt or sting at all.

He nipped at a spot down near Nithael's elbow just to hear Nithael gasp in surprise, then trailed his mouth up and over Nithael's shoulder and collarbone. He buried his nose in the crook of Nithael's neck and murmured against it, "You feel fantastic."

"It didn't hurt? I didn't feel an energy discharge," Nithael said, his curious voice at odds with the way he pulled Craig intimately close.

"No... Is that a bad thing?" He kissed Nithael's pulse point slowly, in order to feel the heart rate underneath. Light and quick but steady.

"Yes. Well, no. Not that I want to see you hurt. But it implies—*Why?* It builds up at a constant rate. I've *calculated*—"

Craig turned his head and nipped at the underside of Nithael's jaw before raising up enough to face him. "Hush, baby." He breathed the words into Nithael's mouth before covering it with his own.

"But—"

"Nithael," Craig interrupted, bracing up on an elbow so he could touch Nithael's mouth with one finger. "Do you want to talk, or..." He deliberately thrust his hips down against Nithael's still-interested body.

Nithael's eyes closed for too long to be a blink; when he looked back up at Craig, the sense of distraction was gone. "Or. Definitely or," he said softly. "Which is terrible grammar—"

"Kiss me, then, before you get too distracted," Craig said with a fond smirk. This genius could lose focus for *anything*.

With a satisfied little hum, Nithael lifted his head and obliged, inviting Craig's tongue to explore with little licks and hot gasps. Craig couldn't remember ever having a lover so unselfconscious, so open to the idea of following the whim of his desire and seeing where it took them, without stifling any of his impulses. It was delightful. And it created a feedback loop connected to Craig's own arousal that was building, slowly and steadily.

Then Nithael wrapped one leg around both of Craig's and thrust up hard, and need spiked right through Craig, making him growl. "More," Nithael insisted without breaking the kiss. "More, Craig. Please."

Hearing his name from Nithael's mouth was something Craig hadn't realized he'd been wanting. When it washed over him, it sent a shiver down his back, and his face flushed hot. He couldn't help smiling at what felt like an accomplishment. He hadn't been sure Nithael had even remembered it until this moment. In gratitude, he kissed Nithael's neck, nipped at his collarbone, then licked the hollow of his throat.

The plea, so desperate and demanding, had helped Craig to focus. He thrust down, a hard, slow drag of his hips, lifting his head to watch Nithael's face flush. His mouth opened, and Craig silenced his cry with a kiss that stole the breath from both of them. Thoughts of what to do next—to give Nithael his mouth or to feel the electric heat inside Nithael's body—scattered under the more immediate promise of pleasure they shared now.

"Craig. Craig, don't stop," Nithael panted, scratching at his shoulders and down his back. Their legs were tangled together, bodies alive with power, and nothing in the world could have convinced Craig to stop, even for a moment.

He came in a blinding rush, liquid heat spreading between them for bare seconds before Nithael cried out wordlessly and joined him. Every inch of Craig's skin came alive, and his vision whited out, images flashing too fast in his head. It was like a broken connection snapping into place, a sense of deep satisfaction that far outstripped the pleasure he'd have expected from a quick, frenzied rutting.

“Oh, fuck, that felt good. Why did that feel so good? I mean, you’re made of electricity or something, but still...” Craig reached up to brush Nithael’s hair away from his face, just so he could look at it, beautifully flushed and lazily sated.

“It wasn’t supposed to feel good?” Nithael asked, baffled.

Craig laughed, smiling wide and loose. “No, sorry, it was definitely supposed to feel good. It just felt better than it should have, somehow.” He kissed Nithael’s forehead to make the frown ridges go away. It didn’t work, and Craig mirrored the frown in worry. “Did it not feel good for you?”

“It did. It—It felt *unusually* good, for what we did. More than the bed should account for.”

Coughing to hide the laugh at the way Nithael’s mind worked, Craig responded, “Always good to have a control, I guess...” He rested his hand on Nithael’s chest, and his chin on his hand. The heartbeat underneath was slow and steady, which was at odds with their exertions just now. “You all right?”

Nithael shifted the pillow under his head and smiled at Craig. “Very satisfied.” He touched Craig’s face, idly tracing the line of his jaw and cheekbone with his fingertips. “Is that something we’re supposed to ask one another?”

“No. Well, sure, but I... you calmed down really quick...” Craig leaned up a bit, took hold of Nithael’s hand, and pressed it to his own still-racing heart. “Not like this.”

Nithael’s frown reappeared, but only for a moment. “Oh. Part of my biological upgrade involves systemic regulation. There’s a failsafe to prevent abrupt changes outside acceptable parameters, but otherwise, I have complete control of certain functions.”

“You... you can *control* your own heartbeat?” Craig shouldn’t have been surprised. He was definitely surprised.

“Within reason,” Nithael assured him. “A too-abrupt change could be destabilizing or cause irreparable damage. And it’s *generally* used only for emergencies, but I find it’s useful to recover after exertion or a traumatic incident, such as an unplanned explosion. There’s no”—he made a twitchy motion with his hand—“tedious recovery period.”

Unplanned explosion. Right. Genius with no sense of self-preservation. “Huh. Okay. This isn’t linked to your ability to control the sting of your tattoo?”

“Oh, not at all. This is a nonstandard modification to the programming. The tattoo energy-bleed is an effect, not an intentional feature.”

“But it shut off while we were...” Craig had thought he understood how all of this worked, at least a little bit, but now he was lost.

“Well, yes. The biological system regulator is programmed to allow *normal* exertions. I overrode that parameter, of course, as part of my modifications, but I left in a switch so I *could* experience everything naturally, when I choose. It has the same result as how the original programming was intended, only with the benefit of being under *my* control, rather than messy biological autonomy.”

“I meant your—” Craig started before the implication of Nithael’s words completely caught up with him. “*Messy biological autonomy?* You mean you... hacked your own heartbeat because it’s *not tidy?*”

Nithael blinked innocently at him. “And breathing and temperature regulation. It’s more efficient. Oh, and sleep.”

Craig blinked dangerously back. “Sleep?”

“Wasting a third of my life sleeping is hardly productive.”

“So you... what? Don’t do it anymore? Nithael...”

“I need *some* sleep,” Nithael said, apparently oblivious to both the health risks and Craig’s growing concern. “I can just better time it to happen while experimental processes are running in my lab, every few days, if I’m converting the time correctly. Synchronized downtime, you could call it,” he added with a proud smile.

“That’s absurd and dangerous. And, honestly, that way madness lies. They’ve done research on long-term sleep deprivation...” Craig stared at Nithael’s guileless face and tried to not let his concern take over completely as something clicked. “Honey, it’s not that your lab assistants don’t like you; it’s that they’re scared of you.”

“Well, yes. It’s easier that way. Otherwise, they’re distracting. Or—What did you call me?”

Craig was brought up short by the question, unable to remember until he played his words back to himself in his head. “Ah, ‘honey’?”

Nithael smiled shyly. “I like that. It’s much better than other possibilities.”

“Such as?” Craig was quite free with his endearments once he started, and he wanted to know which Nithael preferred.

“They won’t translate well. Besides, they’re rarely from lovers. Colleagues, most often. And my relatives. And lab assistants,” he added, starting to frown.

Well, that was worrisome. Craig started to wonder if Nithael’s isolation wasn’t fully his choice. He wrapped his arms around Nithael’s neck and leaned in close until their noses were touching. “There are other sweet things I could call you, if you like them.”

Nithael’s eyes lit up with his smile. “Only if you’d like,” he said quietly. “And even if it’s not terribly productive, we don’t *need* to actually leave the bed.”

Craig leaned back a bit to better focus on Nithael’s face. “Well, I *am* going to make you sleep tonight, but maybe we should take a shower first?”

“Mmm, perhaps, yes. Would you like to go first?”

“You don’t want to join me?” Craig couldn’t help rocking his hips slightly while he spoke.

Nithael’s brows shot up. “Is there room?”

Shrugging noncommittally, Craig answered, “Basically, yes.”

Nithael grinned. “Let’s do that. It’ll also conserve water, yes?”

Again, Craig shrugged, this time with a smirk and another rock of his hips. “Depends on how long it takes you to come.”

“But even—*Oh*. That’s right,” Nithael said in sudden understanding. “You don’t need to conserve water like that. You have oceans and rain.”

“Well, dying oceans, and acid rain is still a problem in some areas, but yeah. What the hell do you have instead?” Craig raised up off of Nithael’s body until he was kneeling between Nithael’s legs. He looked down at the mess they’d made of themselves. A shower was definitely in order.

“Critically low water supplies. It’s become more difficult as our population increases, but there are measures in place to prevent that.”

“Such as group showers? Come on, babe.”

Nithael smiled and sat up as Craig climbed out of the bed. “I also like that.”

“‘Babe’? Good. On the list.”

At least an hour later, soaked and overheated and sorely regretting the on-demand water heater his parents had installed, Craig wrapped his arms around Nithael's body and whispered, "We really should get out, babe. We need dinner."

"Bring it here," Nithael mumbled, leaning back against Craig's chest, though not so far that he was out of the shower spray.

"I'm putting you in a bath next time," Craig mumbled as he tested whether Nithael would stand upright on his own so he could get himself out and dried off.

"A bath? A *water* bath?" Nithael turned—apparently he *could* stand, if he chose—and droplets sprayed everywhere before he repositioned himself. "I've had chemical baths after a harmful exposure, to neutralize the effects, but never *just* water."

"Well, now you know what you have to look forward to tomorrow. But now it's dinnertime. Come on, baby." Craig tugged on the shower curtain to exit, hoping Nithael would follow.

"But..." Nithael unleashed the kicked-puppy expression. The wet hair hanging over his face in streaks of black and dark silver only made it that much more potent.

Craig leaned in to wipe the hair from Nithael's eyes and kiss his cheek. "Food. Then sex. Then sleep."

Nithael gave Craig a calculating look. "Sex? With you?"

"Would you rather it with someone else?"

"Well, no. Wouldn't you, though?"

"Who would I—No. I definitely want to fuck you again. Or for the first time, depending on your definition, given we barely got that far earlier." Even Craig wasn't sure if his own frown was from confusion or offense. When Nithael's face broke into a brilliant smile, though, Craig couldn't help but feel a touch of concern. Did he never have the same partner more than once?

"Then yes. I'd also like that," Nithael said, stepping away from the spray to put his arms around Craig's body.

Hugging Nithael tightly to him, Craig sighed. He really seemed to be good at adopting strays. "Good. Then our evening is all planned out. No getting distracted and trying to calculate the answer to life, the universe, and everything."

“Not my specialty. Cosmology and astrology are too broad and impractical.”

“Perfect.” Craig kissed the top of Nithael’s head and got him out of the bathtub before he could change his mind. Since he hadn’t shown Nithael how to operate the shower—otherwise, he was likely to find Nithael in there at two in the morning—he reached in and turned off the water. Then he pulled a towel off the rack to wrap around Nithael’s shoulders. “Here. Dry off,” he said, getting a towel for himself. “Meet me downstairs.”

Nithael caught his arm when he went to leave the bathroom. “Thank you for the shower.”

Craig brushed his knuckles along Nithael’s jawline and smiled. “Of course, babe.” Nithael let go with a smile, and Craig turned to leave, only to add up just how long Nithael had been in the house. Hiding a sigh, he deliberately turned to the toilet and lifted the lid. “If you’re messing with *that* biological system, there’s no need. There’s a bathroom downstairs, too. Just press that handle when you’re done, to flush.”

Nithael had the grace to look down as if embarrassed. “It’s *convenient*.”

“It’s *unnecessary*. And probably harmful, that amount of waste buildup. Be kind to your body, please. I like it a lot and I want it healthy.”

“I’ve done *a lot* of modifications,” Nithael said guiltily.

“Okay, right, but still. Don’t tax your systems unnecessarily. It’s okay to function like a human sometimes, hon.” Craig cupped Nithael’s jaw with his hand and pulled him close for a quick, soft kiss. “Meet you downstairs,” he said before he left. He closed the bathroom to keep the heat inside out of habit, though Nithael probably didn’t need it. Then again, the way he was taxing his body, there was no sense in making things worse.

Craig’s medical training had him distracted as he dried off, found a pair of boxers to wear, and then went downstairs. The list of possible “system modifications” was too long for comfort. He’d have to get more information, but at least Nithael was being honest with him—something he suspected was all too rare, at least with other people.

Down in the kitchen, he found Cat had entertained herself with Nithael’s papers, shredding more than a few of them. She’d made herself a nest on top of the pile on the laptop. She cracked one eye and gave Craig a warning stare, just in case he was thinking of moving her.

“Not my problem, sweetheart. But *someone's* gonna be pissed.”

He opened the fridge to search through its contents, remembering the fact that animal products were off the table, and found only orange juice and salad fixings that met Nithael's dietary requirements. There was still half a loaf of bread left over from this afternoon's sandwiches. After scraping the bread clean of peanut butter and jam, one finger-full at a time, Nithael had eaten the bread and had shown no ill effects. But PB and J for dinner was depressing. If he could eat bread, though, that meant he could eat pasta, so spaghetti with tomato sauce and a salad would work. Not much in the way of protein, but it would do.

Craig got started on heating the water for pasta, then eyed the coffee pot before deciding that neither of them needed more caffeine. In fact, he emptied the coffee pot, gave it a rinse, then shoved it against the back of the counter, hoping to keep Nithael from recalling its presence. Much like Cat, Nithael seemed to forget things existed if they weren't in his immediate line of sight.

And that thought made him remember Flower. Craig did try to spend a little time with the pony, though most of it was limited to glaring and occasionally evading Flower's bite. The pony was probably happy to be left without human contact, though, and Craig was positive he'd left enough fodder and water to last until morning. Besides, Flower wasn't exactly the delicate type. If something went wrong, the pony would just kick down the fence and show up at the back door. It had happened once or twice, according to Craig's parents.

Instead of finding pants and shoes so he could go outside, Craig gathered up Nithael's calculations into a ragged pile that he stacked to one side on the kitchen table. Cat actually got up and moved from the laptop to the papers—looking for a softer bed, he guessed—so Craig brought the unneeded laptop back to the office.

By the time the water was boiling and the pasta had been thrown in, Nithael walked into the kitchen, naked but dry, except for the lingering dampness in his hair. Craig left off chopping tomato and cucumber for the salad and turned to beckon him closer. “Hey, babe. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Can you grab plates and bowls and forks?” He pointed to the respective cabinets and drawer to find things in. Then he remembered precision was necessary when talking to Nithael and quickly added, “Just two of each.”

“Isn't it more efficient to eat out of the pot?” Nithael asked, starting with the silverware drawer.

“Possibly, but efficiency isn’t always the goal, and both of us eating out of one pot would be messy.” Craig dumped all the salad vegetables on top of a bowl of lettuce, found dressing in the fridge, then set everything on the table. Cat gave it a baleful look. He picked her up and kissed her head, then dropped her onto a chair.

“Isn’t she eating?” Nithael asked as he got down the plates and bowls. He stacked the bowls on the plates, picked up the forks, and then turned to give Craig a questioning look.

“She ate already, when I let her in earlier. Her food is over on the counter if she’s still hungry.” Craig found the colander and set it in the sink for when the pasta was ready to be drained. When he realized Nithael was still standing there with the dishes, he added, “You can put all that on the table. The pasta’s not done yet.”

Nithael obliged, though he did nothing to stop Cat from jumping back up onto the table. Instead, he touched the stack of papers, saying, “That’s right. I was working on your power irregularities. And the teleport process so I can return to my lab.”

Craig had pushed it out of his mind that the endgame here was Nithael leaving to go home, and for now, he preferred to leave it that way. “Plenty of time tomorrow. Sit down. Do you want water or juice with dinner?”

“Tea? Or coffee,” Nithael said hopefully as he sat. Cat immediately walked over to head-butt his hand, and he obliged with a scratch between her ears. He was definitely trainable.

“Tea. No more coffee tonight.” Craig lifted the kettle off a back burner on the stove and gave it a shake to see if there was enough water in it. There was, so he set it down and lit the gas underneath it. “Do you miss it? Your lab?”

Nithael glanced around the kitchen, absently petting Cat. “I don’t know that I feel nostalgic for it. Granted, it’s easier to work with my own equipment. Paper quickly loses its charm. But...” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I *should* say yes, but this feels... good?” He shot Craig an uncertain look.

“Good.” It came out before Craig could stop it. He’d been thinking the same thing as he made dinner, but he had no right to impose his thinking on Nithael. Because this wasn’t like adopting a stray dog; it was like having a stray deer wander into his house and sit down to dinner. Nithael didn’t belong here, but it was nice to have him while he stayed. “I mean, yes. To me, too.”

That got him another beautiful, unselfconscious smile that was only briefly obscured when Cat turned and waved her tail in Nithael's face, trying to get his full attention back. When it didn't work, Craig couldn't help but feel just a little bit smug. Nithael stroked over Cat's back, pushing her tail down, and said, "In that case, I'll probably need more paper."

Nithael gestured with his fork, drawing the tines over his now-empty plate. "It gets both power *and* peripheral status feedback from the nervous system, but it's also aetheric. So it doesn't *drain* my energy so much as use my body to filter the incoming power, converting it to a useable form. Once I eat"—he tapped the plate—"I can route power to keep my mind sharp, negating the necessity for sleep. But if you're tired, you can go. I have more than enough work to last through—When does it get light again at this time of year?"

"About twelve hours after it gets dark. We're near the equinox. But that's not the point, honey. I want to go to bed *with* you." Craig stacked his bowl and plate and gestured for Nithael to hand over his.

"For sleep, sex, or both?" Nithael asked, gathering his dishes. He handed them to Craig and stood up. The scrape of his chair woke Cat, who was dozing on what was now her stack of papers.

Craig stood and brought everything to the sink to deal with in the morning, then turned to respond. "Your choice. No, wait. The sleeping part is mandatory."

"For how long? Sleep, that is."

"Humans in this dimension need eight hours a night, usually. So, no less than six. I won't get up before the sun rises."

"That's twice what I usually get."

"Well, you'll be well-rested for once, then. You can go home and tell all your friends so they can be shocked." Craig walked over to Nithael and offered his arm, as before.

"I have no one I'd consider a 'friend,'" Nithael said, taking possessive hold of Craig's arm. "Family, colleagues—rivals, in some cases," he added disdainfully, as if making clear that *he* didn't consider them rivals. "However many lab assistants I have this semester. Four or five is usual, I think."

Right. Way to put your foot in your mouth, Craig.

“How about me?” He leaned in to speak softly near Nithael’s ear as he guided them to the stairs.

“Wouldn’t you be my lover?” Nithael asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. “Or perhaps a colleague, though the biological sciences are only peripherally involved at most with my specialization.”

Colleague? Craig wasn’t anywhere close to understanding the basics of Nithael’s field of study, let alone a scholar in his own right. The idea seemed absurd, but he was deeply flattered that Nithael would think it of him. He’d known people—especially doctors—like Nithael who looked down on anyone who they didn’t consider to be their equal. It was a pleasant change for Craig, who’d always been on the receiving end of their disdain, to be considered an equal by someone significantly more brilliant.

At least Craig felt like he was starting to understand better how to talk to Nithael, and though he wasn’t fluent yet, he had faith that he would at least be conversant soon. For one thing, he’d figured out that Nithael had almost no sense of flirtation. Or at least not a normal one. “I was thinking I could fall under a couple different classifications. If that works for you.”

Nithael smiled and tightened his hold on Craig’s arm for a moment. “Both, then.”

Craig grinned as he led Nithael upstairs and into his bedroom. “All right, friend, into bed with you.”

Keeping hold of Craig’s arm, Nithael went for the bed. “I’ll try not to disturb you when I get up.”

“I’m a light sleeper. I’ll wake up regardless. It’s fine.” The mess of sheets reminded Craig that he’d used the comforter to hide his laundry. He slipped free of Nithael’s grasp and went to retrieve the comforter from the closet, but then he remembered that Nithael didn’t get cold. “I sleep with the window open, under a comforter. Can you shut off your thermostat so we can cuddle under the covers?”

“I think I’d enjoy that. I usually just sleep under one of the lab tables. Or on them, if the floor hasn’t been recently cleaned.”

He really was trying to get rid of as much of his humanity as possible. How sad. It was clearly time to remind him that it was nice to have a body sometimes, especially when it could be curled up with another body. Craig fetched the comforter and handed it to Nithael. “Here, straighten the sheet and spread that over top. I’ll get the window.”

"Do you usually sleep with someone else?" Nithael asked over the sound of rustling sheets.

"Just Cat these days, when she feels like it." The window sash always stuck about six inches up, so Craig only bothered to tug it that far.

"My presence won't disturb you?"

When Craig turned from the window, he saw Nithael was already under the covers, despite his words. He smiled at the need for reassurance. "No, darling. It will be a pleasure to have you."

"I've never actually shared a bed with anyone. Not for an entire night."

That sounded depressing to Craig, but he couldn't tell if it was something Nithael preferred. Or maybe if it was simply a product of how little he slept. "Well, if you don't like it, you don't have to stay, but you're definitely welcome." He approached the bed then realized they'd run up against the problem of two people in a bed with only one side, since it was pushed up against the wall. "Hm. I can't sleep against the wall, though. So, feel free to climb over me to get out."

"I don't want to inconvenience you." Nithael moved over against the wall and rolled onto his side to face Craig. "You'll tell me if I do?"

"You won't. Or, the benefit of having you here will outweigh any minor inconvenience." Craig figured being as clear as possible would help with any anxiety Nithael might be feeling, but he wasn't sure. He climbed into bed and lay down facing Nithael. "All right?"

Nithael smiled and slid a hand over Craig's hip. "Mmm, I rather think I like having you here with me. If nothing else, you'll keep me warm. You don't find the open window too cold?"

Craig smiled at the touch, and the knowledge that Nithael was letting his own biological processes run without interference. "That's what cuddling is for, hon. And the fresh air this time of year is nice. Roll over."

Obligingly, Nithael rolled onto his back, then allowed Craig to guide him onto his other side, with his back to Craig's chest. As soon as Craig put his arm around Nithael's body, he let out a contented sigh. "Yes. All right, this *is* better."

"See? I told you, I'm full of good ideas." Craig smiled into the mop of hair at the back of Nithael's head, feeling stupidly content at the moment. He nosed further until he found Nithael's nape, then scraped his teeth down a couple

spinal ridges before kissing each of them, earning an even louder, lazily pleased groan.

“You are. You most definitely are. You could do—What *do* you do, anyway? Something biological, wasn't it?”

“Medicine. Earth medicine, which seems vastly different than yours. Very biological. Why?”

Nithael started petting Craig's forearm with slow, soft strokes. “You could do this as well. Sex and companionship.”

Craig chuckled into Nithael's hair. He seemed to have no understanding of the connotations behind that suggestion. Or maybe there was no stigma for that sort of job in his world, which made it sound much more advanced and tolerant. “I've never thought of becoming a sex worker, but it's nice to have a backup plan if I fail my EMT certifications.” He knew Nithael wouldn't get his joking tone of voice, but he couldn't help himself with that amusing thought.

“Mmm, consider it,” Nithael murmured. He shifted and pressed against Craig's body, though it felt more cozy and affectionate than inviting. “Did you want to do that again? Now?”

Seeing Nithael so comfortable and relaxed had Craig thinking he might be able to get them to sleep, if he played his cards right. He snuggled up a little tighter to Nithael's body and brushed the hair out of his eyes, lightly stroking his face and neck and shoulder. “Not now, baby. Just this is perfect.”

“I really do want to figure out your control issues,” Nithael said, though the words came out in a drawl rather than his usual crisp precision. “Especially if your foresight is more often focused on disaster. That could get tedious. And distressing. You shouldn't have to endure that. Do you have an estimated ratio of positive to negative visions?”

This was not a topic of conversation that would lead to restfulness. Especially given the fact that aside from the vision he had earlier, there might have only been a handful of other positive things he'd seen since he started having them. “We can figure it all out tomorrow, honey. For now, let's just enjoy this.” He started to comb his fingers through Nithael's shaggy hair, slowly and steadily, over and over. It wasn't staticky, but left his fingers feeling alive, and he hoped that meant he was sapping extra energy from Nithael.

After another drawn-out purr, Nithael halfheartedly protested, “I really do want to help you. And to figure out what's gone wrong with your abilities. That feels very good.”

“You will, baby,” Craig cooed. “I have no doubt.” He focused on the softness of Nithael’s hair and tried not to marvel at the gentleness with which he touched it. He was accustomed to treating people’s bodies with care, but not like this.

“I’ve had a few incidents.” Nithael shifted again, pressing his body flush against Craig’s as if seeking warmth and comfort. “The energy bleed... That’s not precisely under my control. That is to say, it’s been known to happen. Though not like this...” Half his words were lost to sleepy, contented mumbling.

It sounded as though Nithael’s mouth had detached from his brain and was just sort of running down as he slipped out of consciousness. Craig continued to play with his hair without responding, and the mumbling turned into sighs and then to measured breathing. The last twitch of his muscles relaxing fully against Craig was the sign to stop petting his new resident genius and let himself fall asleep.

That, however, was easier said than done. His mind was full of Nithael and the time they had spent getting to know each other—which Craig calculated had been only about ten hours. That seemed absurd for how far they’d come and what they had shared. By that count, the progression to lovers—and to an intimacy beyond simply sex—was way too quick. And yet, he couldn’t shake how it hadn’t felt that way in the least.

Maybe Nithael was a time-traveler after all? As if this could get any weirder than it was already, with a random naked scientist from another fucking dimension just showing up and making himself at home like Cat had. And how the hell had Craig ended this day cuddling him to sleep when it had started out with nothing more than a quiet walk in the woods?

Nithael was already a fixture in his house—one that he could get used to. And *that* was a problem. No matter how close they felt, no matter how intimate they’d been, Nithael was a stranger, not just to Craig but to his whole world.

And yet... this had happened before. Nithael had spoken of portals as if they were used frequently to move between their worlds. Craig’s own great-grandfather, it seemed, had conceivably travelled over however many “shifts,” as Nithael called them, to settle on Earth. He’d even raised a family here. Though look how well that had turned out, given the issue of Craig’s uncontrollable “gift.”

The whole “literally from separate worlds” thing was still a problem, but not one Craig could solve in bed with Nithael’s warm body nestled against his own.

There was time enough to get to know Nithael better tomorrow, assuming Craig could keep him from getting distracted by his work. He suspected that if this, between them, turned into something more than a casual relationship, he'd be wrangling his scientist most of the time.

Not tonight, though. Craig settled himself comfortably, spooned right up to Nithael's back, arm around his chest, and cleared his mind. And like any good soldier who'd spent too much time in the field, Craig was asleep in minutes.

Chapter 5

“Craig. *Craig*. Wake up.”

Through the fog of sleep, Craig registered the use of his first name, which kept him from feeling the need to snap to, ready to assess the threat level of his location. First name meant home. Family. Safety. The luxury to ignore whoever felt the need to wake him at this hour.

He grunted and twitched, ready to roll over, when he felt a very awake, very warm body pressed to his. This demanded attention. He cracked an eye open to let in light and grunted again, this time with an inquisitive tone. “Hmm?”

“I’ve recalled the anomaly that caused me to teleport *here*. It wasn’t a destination; it was an anchor. Specifically, you.”

“What?” Craig opened both eyes wide and saw Nithael looking at him with bright, excited eyes. It took a second for the words to filter into Craig’s brain and arrange themselves into meaning, though it seemed as though they didn’t have much of that to begin with. “That’s impossible.”

“Not at all. Well, yes, *theoretically* it’s impossible, but only if you limit yourself to conventional multidimensional thought. I simply added *intent* to the equation, and the teleport chose *you* as my destination. We have the same exact problem—which I should have realized earlier, but I was admittedly disoriented from the amnesia. Solving *your* problem will give me the insight to solve my own. It’s a matter of being forced to look at the issue from another point of view. Well, less *forced* and more given additional data, which naturally I wouldn’t have had without you, since you’re from, well, here.”

Craig grabbed hold of Nithael’s arm, hoping to steady himself and slow Nithael down. “But... yeah. I mean, no. You didn’t know I existed. How could you come to me?”

“It’s standard to any teleport, actually. You enter the coordinates, and you go there, whether you know *what’s* there or not.”

“You were flying blind? Nithael! You could have—I don’t even know what, but *death*.” Craig was not ready to deal with all of this so early. Or at least, so soon after waking. And before coffee.

Nithael pouted adorably. “I was very careful with the parameters I entered.”

Not being able to focus on anything else but the plump, protruding lip before him, Craig leaned in to nip at it. “Still sounds impossible. And ridiculous. Parameter intention for me.” He shook his head and moved to get up, but Nithael caught his arm.

“Not for *you*. For what I required to deal with my increasingly erratic energy patterns. Which, yes, *is* you—or at least your own inability to control your power—but not for you because of some less significant reason. I don’t teleport out of my office on a whim, after all.”

“Glad to know showing up in some random guy’s backyard, taking over his kitchen with mounds of paper, drinking all his coffee, and then fucking him isn’t counted in your book as a whim,” Craig muttered as he pulled himself free of Nithael’s grasp and stood up. “Coffee?”

“Coffee. Yes. And then,” Nithael said excitedly, “I think I can work out how to fix everything.”

There was no sense in trying for anything like a normal morning routine—not for Craig and not for Cat, at least. Craig had no idea what Nithael’s morning routine was like, if he noticed such trivial things as “morning” at all.

Craig made coffee for himself, set up the pot to brew more for Nithael, and then went out back alone. Cat had abandoned Craig in favor of sitting on Nithael’s lap, claws digging into the too-large sweatpants Craig suggested he put back on, because nudity was charming only in limited quantities. So Craig went out alone and sipped his coffee while he took care of Flower’s pen.

At least the pony was acting normal. He was as ill-tempered as ever and spent most of his time trying to chew on Craig’s sleeve or arm or hair—whatever came in reach. Craig was used to being on his guard around the pony and made it out without more than a couple of near-misses and some slobber on the flannel shirt he kept in the barn to keep his normal clothes clean.

Once Flower was fed and provided with a clean stall, Craig went back inside. Nithael hadn’t moved towards the full coffee pot; he was scribbling furiously with one hand, petting Cat with the other.

“Caffeine,” he said. “And food. I’m unusually hungry this morning.”

Right. Bed and breakfast proprietor. Wordlessly, Craig filled a mug and set it near Nithael’s elbow, then went to the bread box. Toasted PB and J was a thing, wasn’t it?

Nithael didn't say another word, even when Craig provided the best vegan breakfast he could manage. Craig had become a puzzle to solve, not a person to get to know, and the whole point of Nithael being here was to figure that out so he could fix his own problem and go home.

Well, might as well go about his morning as though he was alone in the house, given one, he effectively was, with Nithael stationed silently at the table, and two, it was going to be SOP again soon, at the rate Nithael worked.

He went into the living room to do his usual morning stretches and one hundred crunches, then flopped down on the couch and thought about calling Grampa Ellis. Not that he knew what to say. "*I've got my hands full with an adorable, infuriating, genius scientist from another world. Thoughts on what the fuck to do with him?*" Not gonna happen.

Of course, within a minute, his phone rang.

Craig answered with the words, "Thanks, Gramps."

"I thought so. What's up, Doc?" Grampa Ellis's voice was mild and affectionate, not worried. It eased something inside Craig. Maybe he could actually have this conversation.

"Where was Pawpaw Ciaran from?"

"Ah." The pause before and after the one syllable spoke volumes. Grampa knew about this other world, but how much did he know?

"Exactly. Okay. You know that can happen whenever, right?" Craig asked.

"And...?" his grandfather asked in return, sounding unsurprised.

Good, they were on the same page. Or maybe Craig was just now catching up. Might as well cut to the chase. "And he says he can fix me."

"I didn't know you were broken, kiddo." Grampa's voice was a combination of tender and corrective. This was a common theme in their conversations about Craig's gift.

"No, I know. I mean my... control issue."

"Ah. Uh-huh. So what's the fuss?"

Of course it was easy for him to take all of this in stride. He'd been raised by a citizen of the *Cathair*. "Heh. Well, why? And why should I let him?"

"Does it sound odd to say *karma*?"

Somehow that made sense, but Craig didn't know if Gramps meant it was Craig's job to right a wrong of Pawpaw's or something more nebulous. "Familial or dimensional?"

"Hmm. Both, I'd imagine."

Great, that didn't help narrow it down at all. His voice came out as close to a whine as he allowed, at his age. "Gramps..."

There was an impatient pause on the line, something Craig was always surprised existed, until Gramps executed one. "Does it fix an imbalance?"

"Well, kinda. He's got a control issue too."

"Then, good. That makes it right." The word "right" was given a weight that Craig wasn't sure he wanted to carry. Doing what was right wasn't the problem; it was in understanding the consequences where things got difficult.

"And then what?" Craig asked, hoping for a bit of guidance.

"That, you'll have to tell me, son."

"Right. Shit. Okay." This wasn't Grampa's story to tell. It fell on Craig to follow it to its conclusion. Craig could feel the silence between them after he spoke as an acknowledgement of their connection, and it gave him strength, as it always had.

"Ring me again soon, you hear?" Grampa's words of farewell were spoken softly, and with fondness.

Craig had to clear the lump in his throat to speak. "Yeah. Will do. Love you."

"You too, Craig."

First name again. That was rare from Gramps. Craig put his phone away wondering if that was a good sign or a bad one. He didn't like worrying Grampa Ellis, but more, he didn't like it when there was something bad enough to worry him.

Absolutely nothing about this situation felt bad, though. Except the prospect of it ending.

The need to eat—and to feed Nithael—something other than peanut butter finally spurred Craig into moving. He took a quick shower alone, then dressed and went downstairs. "What do—"

“Invoke a vision,” Nithael interrupted, looking back over his shoulder at Craig. “Right now.”

“What? No. I can’t. It doesn’t work like that.” Despite himself, Craig walked up to Nithael’s chair and rested a hand on the back, looking between Nithael’s face and the pages in front of him. “Why?”

“Invoking a vision should be as easy as breathing. Well, not autonomic, but as easy as *intentionally* breathing. Back away”—Nithael made a shooing motion—“and invoke a vision.”

Craig let out a frustrated huff. He wondered if lab rats felt this way. “It’s not that simple. Never has been. Gimme about fifteen minutes, and I might find something.”

“It should only take a few seconds. Try,” Nithael told him as he picked up the pen and went back to writing, not even looking in Craig’s direction.

He pulled out the chair next to Nithael and sat down. He planted his feet, aligned his spine, closed his eyes, and breathed slowly—and yes, intentionally—in and out. He quieted his mind and let the scratching of Nithael’s pen be the background noise of his meditation. When a thought caught his attention, he set it free to float away without taking him with it, keeping his attention on his steady breathing. Letting everything drift away like that had been a somewhat reliable way of allowing space for a vision to grab hold. Sometimes it took him longer than others, unless there was something vitally important for him to know ASAP. Then those visions didn’t wait for him to make room.

Today the air in the room felt different, and it was easier to sharpen and dull his focus as needed. He did have to constantly pull his attention from Nithael—the noises and movements he made, the aura of concentration he let off, his breathing—until he realized that allowing space for his attention on Nithael to be part of his meditation was something that kept him grounded in space and time. And then, not long after he figured out how to support all the things in his head at once without actively holding onto any of them, his mind’s eye and senses were taken over. He was thrown into the experience of something like a huge electromagnetic pulse—sort of a lightning strike without the igniting spark—in the air directly before him.

It was loud and bright and explosive without actually being any of those things. It was as if the air had been hit by a force beyond sight, making his reality feel like the surface of a pond when a stone drops through it. The

concussion reverberated through every fiber of his being. He staggered back and fell, nostrils filled with ozone, eyes tightly shut to the disorienting sight, skin tingling with residual energy. The grass beneath his hands felt cold and damp, his ears were ringing, and his only thought was, "Where's Nithael?" A bolt of fear and longing shot through him, drying his mouth. He reached out with his hand, his mind following, and his waking consciousness responded to the call, pulling him back to his present reality.

He was lying on the floor, looking up into Nithael's curious face, cast into shadow by the overhead kitchen light. Nithael still had the pen in one hand. "That was dramatic," he observed.

Craig huffed out the breath he was holding, rubbed his face with his hands, and then blinked to bring himself back fully into his body. "You could say that. Wait. For you? What did you see?"

"You stood up so abruptly, you nearly broke your chair. Then, you staggered about for a few seconds before collapsing. I don't think you're injured—I risked touching you to check, and to cushion your head." With the hand not holding the pen, Nithael brushed at Craig's hair. "You were unconscious for almost two full minutes."

"Thanks. Sorry if I worried you." Craig had forgotten why he used to search for visions in his bed, or at least lying down in the desert. He sat up and looked back to see a kitchen towel folded up on the floor where his head had been. "You didn't get a flash of the vision, then?"

Nithael frowned, letting his hand trail down Craig's arm. "No. Did you expect that I would? Were you trying to broadcast? You're not a telepath as well, are you?"

"No, no, I just... You saw the last one, and I have no idea what I just experienced." Craig knew he was frowning and tried to smile at Nithael, but it probably ended up a squint. He turned his hand palm-upward to catch hold of Nithael's fingers when they swept over it.

Nithael's fingers spread, lacing with Craig's, and then curled to hold their hands together. "Was it *not* a vision? It didn't look like a seizure, nor were you at risk of harming yourself."

"No, it was. It's just that I don't really understand what I saw. It was an explosion without anything actually exploding." The warm tingle of energy from Nithael's hand was surprisingly comforting, and Craig was tempted to pull him into a hug to feel it against his racing heart. "Oh. Shit. Headache."

“‘An explosion without anything actually exploding’ sounds like a massive, instantaneous energy transfer. That could be anything from a catastrophic power discharge to a high-mass teleport. Can you give a frame of reference for the”—he hesitated, fingers twitching, and frowned—“strength of the explosion?”

“Do you have lightning? Felt like it struck the air right in front of me. Knocked me back a few feet.”

Nithael shook his head. “We don’t have a *complete* dimension—just the *Cathair*, the Shadowlands around the perimeter, and established portals here. No weather, no natural day/night cycle, no proper ecosystem. But you shouldn’t be having a vision from that side in any case, unless you’re meant to go there.”

“That sounds awful.” Craig spoke before he realized how insulting his words were. “I mean, not to have a fully established world sounds... well, not something I understand, obviously. Sorry.”

“It’s very convenient, except for the water and the occasional issues with our food supply if we can’t bring enough across from here. It’s *much* less erratic than simply letting interconnected chaos-based systems have their way—weather and all that.” Nithael smiled as he added, “Though your shower is very much a benefit.”

“Water is the source of all life on this planet.” Craig tried to let go of Nithael’s hand to stand up, but it didn’t really work. “Speaking of, I need a lot of it right now, before the headache takes hold. Coming?”

“But we’re not finished,” Nithael protested. “I need to see if physical contact has a measurable effect on your foresight.”

Craig stood and tugged at Nithael’s hand to get him on his feet. “I just need to get to the sink, babe. Let go or come with.”

Nithael rose and walked with Craig, holding onto him absently. “It would help if you could have an *identifiable* vision next time. Emotional attachment is difficult to quantify, but it’s possible—in a broad sense—as long as it’s kept simple. Try to see something with meaning and not an obscure energy event.”

“I don’t get to choose, Nithael,” Craig said as he filled a glass from the tap. “But there was a shot of fear at the end, if that helps.”

“Marginally. Was it personalized fear? Direct harm to you? Or to someone else?”

Downing the entire glass of water in one long drink to buy time, Craig tried not to worry how Nithael would react to the coming admission. "I didn't know where you were." He turned to refill his glass, avoiding eye contact.

Nithael turned towards him, rubbing a hand over his arm. "Was it backsight? Were you seeing my arrival here?" he asked, and the sharp, focused edge was gone from his voice.

"N—Oh. I felt an incredible sense of loss. Will it look like that when you leave?" Craig couldn't turn back around to face Nithael. He just stood at the sink, looking down into his glass of water.

"Like..." Nithael's hand went still. Very slowly, as though choosing his words with care, he asked, "Is that what you saw? Me leaving?"

"I don't know. But so far, I've only ever seen things that might happen. A lot of them haven't, but they all could have." Craig turned around to take hold of Nithael's hand, glancing up at his face. So far, he'd seen Nithael lost in ecstasy and scientific speculation, mildly puzzled or adorably exhausted. He'd never seen this before—the way Nithael frowned, eyes darting about without focus, the way he had his lips pressed together as if to hold back something he wanted to say. Craig looked away before he had to hear it, instead focusing on lacing their fingers.

"Do you *want* me to leave?"

It came out calm and slightly curious, just like most of Nithael's other questions, but there was an odd heaviness in the words, spaces between them that hadn't been there before.

Craig found himself shaking his head before he even looked up and found his voice. "I don't want you to feel stranded here, away from your family and your lab, but... No."

Nithael relaxed, leaning against Craig's side. "It's not possible to be stranded here. We're *from* here, if you recall."

"If I—What? Seriously?" Craig wrapped his arm around Nithael's back and settled so Nithael's shoulder fit better against him. "How?"

This time, Nithael gave his much more familiar "*you really don't know this?*" frown. "My ancestors—well, *our* ancestors—left here hundreds of years ago, when their energy manipulation skills were misconstrued as superstitious nonsense. They pooled their knowledge and determined how to best create a stable side-dimension, limited in scope but sufficient for their security."

A thousand questions flitted through Craig's head, but only one seemed pertinent. "How often does someone come back here to stay?"

Nithael blinked. "I've no idea. Is that relevant?"

Craig was caught short. To him it was. In his experience, long distance didn't work unless it was for a set time period or the distance wasn't that far. Dating someone in another dimension was neither of those things. He scrambled for some scrap of reasoning that didn't make him look ridiculous. "You said something about not being stranded, and if this was your original home, I wondered if people still came back to stay on purpose sometimes. Like my great-grandad did."

"I suppose, yes." Nithael shrugged. "If nothing else, it's encouraged for genetic diversity. And I know visits are fairly frequent now, though generally through monitored portals to prevent... well, an incident such as how *we* met. Though actually, it wouldn't have prevented that at all. And to prove that, *you* need to have another vision while in physical contact with me."

"But... that's five events in twenty-four hours. That's a lot for me. I dunno if I can do that. Or if I should even try."

"I could *try* to stabilize you," Nithael said thoughtfully. "You've already proven adept at bleeding off my own excess energy buildup, which implies there's a resonance between us."

That was definitely true. After a night's worth of physical contact, Craig had been feeling the desire to touch Nithael's skin at every opportunity, and it was getting harder to resist by the minute, especially after being drained by the vision. When they weren't touching, he was starting to physically miss the hum of Nithael's skin on his. "Yes. All right. But it might not work."

"If it doesn't, that's also confirmation."

"Of what? Do I even want to know?" Craig finished off his water and nudged Nithael to start walking with him towards the stairs.

Nithael shook his head. "I came here to find a solution to my energy imbalance. The teleport algorithm focused on *you*. If you're the superstitious sort, then it's 'magic' that found you."

"Well, it's good to know some random machine and its equations have that much confidence in me." Craig leaned in to kiss Nithael's temple, then nudged him again to get him headed upstairs. "Come on. Bed."

“It’s not some *random machine*,” Nithael said, sounding offended. “I modified that teleporter myself. And I modified the algorithm entirely on my own. It was *perfect*. You’re the best fit for all the parameters I entered. It’s just a matter of degrees.”

“Of course it was, honey. I didn’t mean it that way. And I’m flattered. I just don’t know...” Craig trailed off, thinking about what it meant for Nithael to have basically set a computer to match him with another person, and it had taken Nithael to another dimension to find *him*. Extreme computer dating. “Um... I don’t know if I’m as confident in my abilities as the teleporter.”

“‘The teleporter’?” Nithael asked. “My teleportation device or the algorithm I designed?”

“Ah, both, I guess.” Craig ushered Nithael into the bedroom. “How much surface area are we looking for here?”

“It shouldn’t—” Nithael stopped and shot Craig a look that would’ve been credibly suspicious, if not for the smile hovering on his lips. “Is this a hint that you’d prefer we do this naked? In your bed?”

Craig smiled at the first inkling that Nithael might be learning subtext, even though he hadn’t been intentionally aiming for sex. “Lying down on a soft surface before trying for a vision seems smart, given where I ended up last time, and you wanted to be touching me while I did it, so... Yes. The answer is yes.” He stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it at Nithael’s head.

Nithael caught it, and the smile blossomed. “It’s normally hazardous to be naked in my lab, you know. This is much safer.” He pushed down his borrowed sweatpants and stepped over them, heading for the bed.

Leaving his boxers on to aid in focus—or at least to discourage distraction—Craig climbed in next to him and lay down on his back. “More experiments clearly need to be happening in bed, then.”

Nithael rolled over and curled up against his side, one leg trapping both of Craig’s. His fingers drew little circles over Craig’s chest. “I’m *positive* the College of *Ollavs* wouldn’t sanction that.”

Craig laughed. “Not official experiments for publication. Just private research to sate our own curiosity.”

“Research for its own sake is useful only for learning proper scientific processes. Otherwise, research is *meant* to be shared.”

“Well, darling, if you want to share the highest number of orgasms I can give you in a twelve-hour period with your colleagues, that’s fine.” Craig smiled as innocently as he could and blinked at Nithael, who was staring back at him, wide-eyed.

“Highest twelve-hour colleagues what?” he asked in a rush. “You can—*We*—Did you have a vision?”

Breaking Nithael’s brain was quickly becoming one of Craig’s favorite pastimes. He couldn’t manage his grin at the sight. “When? Of that? No. But it sounds like a good idea to study that sort of thing.”

Nithael ducked his head, but there was no hiding the flush that crept up his cheeks. “Focus,” he said, though it came out more like a plea than a command. “A vision.”

“I haven’t had one—Oh! You want me to try. Yes, I can do that.” Craig had to admit that even he was a bit distracted after thinking up that research project. And having Nithael’s body pressed up against his side was *not* the best way to get him more focused. Or maybe it was, just not about the vision.

Nithael let out a quiet laugh and rested his head on the pillow beside Craig’s. “If I hurt you, let me know,” he said, holding up his hand as the tattoo swirled under his skin, covering the back of his hand. “I suspect this might help keep you stable.”

Craig found himself actually looking forward to the slight stinging sensation of Nithael’s nano-whatevers, and it made his face flush hot. He nodded and watched as the swarm of ink-like darkness coated his fingers, all the way to the tips. Then he closed his eyes to better feel Nithael’s touch on his chest as he tried to clear his mind and focus on his breath, which of course caught with the initial brush of nano-enhanced skin over his heart.

“Yes,” he said softly. Nithael tensed and went to pull his hand back, but Craig caught it, saying, “I mean, no. It doesn’t hurt. Yes, it helps.”

“Good.” Nithael flattened his hand on Craig’s chest and snuggled closer. “I suspected it might.”

Breathing deeply and grounding himself in place and time, Craig couldn’t help but ask, “Does it feel as good for you as it does for me?”

“It does. It’s... soothing,” Nithael said after a moment’s thought. “It’s like there’s always a weight pressing down on my chest. I’ve grown accustomed to it, so I don’t notice it until it’s gone, like it is now.”

Yes. That made sense. That was what it felt like the first few minutes after he had a vision. The relief was diminished by the headache and thirst, but falling into a vision was the lifting of a weight.

Craig wanted that now, and he made himself focus on the touch, letting it sweep away all other thoughts in his head. Before today he would have never thought that focusing on someone else would help him clear his head for a vision to come, but somehow, within only a couple minutes he was at that place of not holding on to anything but finding balance and clarity.

And the vision came all at once, as if he were slammed forward in time to witness a possible life with Nithael. A simple moment in a day like many they'd had and would have. Where lemon yellow sunlight filtered through the kitchen window, the homey scent of vegan blueberry pancakes hung in the air with the dust motes, and Nithael's eyes shone as he picked Cat off the table to set her in his lap. The texture of the kitchen table under Craig's hand, the tang of blueberry mixed with sugary sweet maple syrup, the warmth of a chuckle bubbled up inside him, sharing space with Nithael's bright laugh.

Dropping out of that vision would have been painful if Nithael's touch hadn't been the first thing he could sense. He drew a deep breath and then took hold of Nithael's gently tingling hand, exhaling slowly to savor both the vision and this moment of connection with his lover. His... something more than that. The person with whom he could share this deeply hidden facet of himself as if it were as normal as breathing. Craig couldn't quite articulate how much that meant to him, how easy it was to breathe around Nithael simply because he didn't have to hold back a very important part of the way he functioned.

"Thank you, darling." Before he even opened his eyes, Craig had spoken the words.

Nithael hummed thoughtfully. "I suspected as much."

That didn't follow. Craig was still a bit fuzzy, but he could tell Nithael wasn't quite with him. "What? Did you figure it out?"

"Of course I did." Nithael sat up and turned to lean his back against the wall so he could face Craig. "My teleport was programmed to bring me to precisely whatever I require to stabilize my own energy buildup issue. If *you* are what I require, that implies that we share not only a resonant connection but certain characteristics—energy processing coefficients, for one. It's uncommon, though not particularly rare. Though for it to happen with someone *here*... The chances of that are almost nil. Hence the unprepared multi-shift teleport."

Craig blinked. *You are what I require.* Was that what this was? And if so, did it have to sound so technical and sterile? “Can you be more... concrete in your explanation? What do you mean by ‘energy processing coefficients’?”

“Understand, I’m not a geneticist or biomancer,” Nithael explained, “but everyone has a certain set of characteristics defining how they sense, manipulate, control, and route energy, generally referred to as energy processing coefficients. When two people share the same or similar coefficients—though we have yet to determine *how* similar, because of a limited study pool—shared workings create a multiplicative effect, rather than additive.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Craig started to wonder if it wouldn’t have been easier to deal with someone who spoke an alien language than deciphering Nithael’s science-speak. “So... tell me what it means for you and me.”

“It’s the genetic consequence of how we came to the *Cathair*. Because it was a *group* working, my genetic ancestors—*our* ancestors,” he corrected, “were inclined towards shared coefficients. As I said, it’s not uncommon to find two or more people who are stronger when working together. Stronger *and* more stable. I didn’t consider that in my calculations for *myself*, which... well, is why I was so unprepared to end up here.”

“What did you think you would find, then?”

“Information. An explanation for my energy buildup and discharge issue.”

“And instead you found someone who makes you a better, more stable person. Who knew an algorithm could find you a soulmate?” Craig smirked at the idea.

Nithael blinked at him a couple of times. “A what?”

Ah. Shit. It was never fun to have to explain a joke, and this one could quite possibly make things uncomfortable. *Idiot.* “I was joking, really, but it’s the perfect person for you. Someone who completes you. I wasn’t saying...” But he was, sort of. And Craig didn’t want to back down from that because of the possible romantic implications that Nithael might not even catch.

After a few awkward, silent seconds, Nithael shook his head. “Oh. No, I’d never expect that from you! A working partnership is perfectly efficient, without any emotional expectations.”

Craig wasn’t sure if that statement was born out of Nithael’s seeming inexperience with emotional things, or his preference for working above all

else. He sat up and rested his hand on Nithael's knee. "But, baby, we can't work together. We aren't in the same discipline. And you've said yourself that you barely even tolerate lab assistants in your space."

"And they barely tolerate me," Nithael agreed. "No one actually *likes* being around me for any length of time, and only that much at conferences and lectures. Even my family finds me intolerable after a few hours."

Sliding his hand up Nithael's thigh, Craig leaned in and spoke soft and low, but very clearly. "We just spent twenty-four together, and I'm doing just fine. Better than fine."

Nithael's brows shot up. "Yes, but I was *helping* you. You don't need me anymore, except the minimal contact required for both of us to stabilize."

"Is that all you want from me? Minimal contact?" Craig took his hand from Nithael's addictive skin but didn't back away, wondering if Nithael could possibly miss the touch as much as he did.

"I... don't want you to not like me," Nithael said uncertainly.

Craig reached out to touch Nithael's cheek lightly. "Honey, every hour I've spent with you, I've come to like you more, not less."

"That's—" Nithael started to shake his head, then stopped, as if he didn't want to pull away from Craig's hand. "People don't.... do that. Me. *Like* me, I mean."

"I'm not 'people,' hon. I'm your person." Craig smoothed the hair out of Nithael's eyes and kissed his nose.

Nithael tipped his head, staring at Craig in fascination. "That's not... a very normal response. I don't want you to come to dislike me. I thought—Well, I thought if we could minimize our contact, it wouldn't happen. At least, not so quickly."

Craig huffed in frustration. "I'm telling you that's not necessary, Nithael. I not only feel the need to be around you and touch you, but I *want* to. Unless that's something you *don't* want, shut up already."

"But—" slipped out before Nithael closed his mouth. After a couple of seconds, he nodded, still staring at Craig with wide eyes.

Smiling at how literally Nithael took his statement, and sighing inwardly in relief, Craig said, "Fantastic. Glad that's settled. Now, do you want to touch me?"

Again, Nithael nodded. Silently.

Aha. Still following orders. Craig tried not to enjoy that too much, but it was too convenient at the moment. "Right now?"

Another nod.

"Is there anything pressing that you need to say before you do so?"

"Are you certain you're both sane and rational enough to make this sort of decision? I really can be very intolerable."

Craig grinned. "Not at all certain. But very willing to try. Now touch me."

Carefully, Nithael lifted his hands to cup Craig's jaw and leaned in close, staring into his eyes until the moment their lips touched. The kiss was gentle and tentative—or, no, not *tentative* but precise. It was as if he were afraid of doing it wrong.

Did he think Craig would change his mind if he wasn't perfect? They'd get nowhere that way. And the more they sat there, the more Craig wanted to revel in the connection between them, which at the moment meant as much physical touch as possible. "Beautiful. But definitely not enough. Do you want more?"

"Mmm. Definitely not enough," Nithael repeated, leaning in close again. This time, he licked and nipped, throwing all of his scientific focus into a much more heartfelt, passionate kiss that Craig felt all the way down to his toes.

Yes. Good. This was very good. And satisfied something deep inside Craig in a way he hadn't expected. Something had started to line up right for them, and he wanted nothing more than to slake his thirst with Nithael's body.

He wrapped his arms around Nithael as he returned the kiss, shivering at the warming energy of Nithael's skin. He needed more contact. "Might never get enough," he whispered into Nithael's mouth. "Lie down, babe."

Without hesitation, Nithael turned and shifted, pulling Craig down with him as he stretched out on his back. When Craig lay down beside him, he broke the kiss and asked, "You'll tell me if I do something you don't like?"

"Yes. Of course. As long as you do the same." A gentle press on the shoulder got Nithael to move closer to the middle of the bed. Craig rolled on top of him and looked down into his face, marveling at how this man could even exist. And had found *him*. "But I kinda like everything. And we have some experimenting to do."

Nithael's eyes lit up with his sudden smile. "Perhaps we *are* well-matched," he agreed, sliding his hands down Craig's back so he could get his fingertips under the waistband of Craig's boxers. "Experiment all you want."

Craig hummed, once again pleased at the permission. He kissed Nithael hungrily, pressing their bodies together and rocking his hips with the need to share that pleasure. And when Nithael spread his legs and wrapped them around Craig's hips to hold him more tightly, Craig responded with a thrust that made him remember the hot surprise of yesterday's pleasure.

But now, he wanted more. He wanted so much more, both for himself and for Nithael. Though he wasn't entirely sure about Nithael's past experiences, he suspected they hadn't been very satisfying. The thought of Nithael's pleasure always being clinical and matter-of-fact, rather than emotionally-based and hedonistic, was disheartening to consider.

He pulled away from Nithael's mouth to kiss down his throat to his chest. Then, with his mouth over a nipple, asked, "How do you—" before he caught himself. That sort of open-ended question was likely to end in a discussion, complete with flow charts. Instead, hiding a grin, he asked, "Do you want me inside you? Or something different?"

"I have no idea. Anything you want," Nithael said in a rush. "You have a remarkable instinct for sex. At least, sex without a deadline. Do... *more*."

"Yes, sir." Craig couldn't help the half-reflexive response to Nithael's familiar refrain. He bit down lightly on Nithael's nipple, making him gasp as if surprised, though he didn't pull away. That made Craig bite a second time, just a little bit harder, before he reached to unwrap Nithael's legs around his waist and said, "Gimme one sec, and I will."

"What? Why?" Nithael pushed unsteadily up onto his elbows to watch as Craig got out of bed.

"'More' requires supplies. It's a good idea, I promise." He padded over to his duffel in the corner and fished around for his first-aid kit, thankful he hadn't completely unpacked. He scattered pressure bandages and suture packets, and he finally found a pack of nitrile gloves and the strip of condoms folded up at the bottom of the kit. There hadn't been much opportunity to use them recently, but they were new enough that they could be trusted. Then he went for the nightstand, where he remembered seeing a half-empty bottle of lube at the back of the bottom drawer, left over from his home visit over the Christmas holiday

last year. He set everything down on the nightstand, shucked off his boxers, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Nithael had rolled onto his side and was watching intently. "Supplies, yes. But that?" He nodded at the condoms.

"They're condoms. For protection against sexually transmitted diseases..."

Nithael was still frowning, though after a few seconds, he said, "Oh. I'm perfectly healthy."

Tempted as Craig was to forego the condoms, he was too medically aware to take that chance with either of them. "We're from two different worlds. I may have immunities to things that could get you sick, and vice versa. Let's not take chances."

"Foresight or forethought?" Nithael asked with a sly smile. "Contingency planning is part of a good experimental process."

Craig smiled, remembering Nithael's mention of expected versus unplanned explosions. He'd probably have to work with Nithael on refining his "contingency planning" techniques. And that made him realize it was probably best to head off any experimentation in this case. He ripped open one of the condom packets and offered the contents to Nithael. "Here. It's a barrier," he said, handing the condom to Nithael.

Sure enough, Nithael spent about a minute poking at the latex, unrolling it, muttering things about elasticity, permeability, and tensile strength as Craig absently put a glove on one hand and watched his scientist lover. Nithael's curiosity, intellect, and focus made for a peculiar sort of charm, Craig realized—a charm that had become an addiction.

He couldn't keep the amused grin off his face as he remembered Nithael wasn't the only one who was supposed to be experimenting. He turned and crawled onto the bed and started petting Nithael, subtly encouraging him to lie back down. When he did, Craig inched down and stroked lightly over Nithael's thighs. That got him a soft hum of appreciation, and Nithael spread his legs just a bit.

Perfect, Craig thought, letting his fingers rove up over Nithael's balls. He teased through tight curls and had to grin when he saw a few silver strands. He moved up, dragging his fingers over the soft foreskin, and Nithael's breath hitched. His cock, which had softened a bit in his scientific distraction, began to thicken again.

Craig settled next to Nithael's leg, indulging in his own research, learning what Nithael liked. Light, teasing touches made Nithael gasp and twitch; harder strokes earned soft moans. And after a moment's thought, Craig decided to trust in Nithael's biostabilization system just a little bit—enough for a couple of long, slow licks that made the condom fall from Nithael's fingers, forgotten.

“Oh. Oh, do that,” Nithael said on a gasp. His fingers touched Craig's hair lightly, as if he were afraid Craig would stop, which he had to for a moment, sadly.

“I will, if you hand me a fresh one of those.” He nodded to the condom on Nithael's stomach. The hot tingle of Nithael's cock on his tongue was thrilling, but Craig knew better that to be tempted by it.

Nithael turned, scanning for the condoms. He picked up the whole strand of them, examined it for a couple of seconds, then ripped one off and offered it to Craig. “These wouldn't be terribly useful in my lab. It's usually not safe to undress more than the bare minimum.”

“This is *not* a substitute for clothing, Nithael.” Craig grinned at the image of Nithael in nothing but a condom, doing experiments in... something to do with “field manipulation.” Odds that it looked remarkably like Tony Stark's lab were high.

He ripped open the packet and discarded the wrapper, then took hold of Nithael's cock by the base. He set the condom in place and was about to roll it on, when he looked up and saw Nithael's focus on his hands was razor-sharp. “Do you want to...?”

“To what?”

Craig smiled. “To put it on. You roll it down. Keep about this much”—he pinched up the tip of the condom—“slack, and roll the rest down, all the way.”

“I see. Yes, I think so,” Nithael said thoughtfully, reaching down.

And then it was Craig's turn to stare at those long, clever fingers, making him wonder if he shouldn't encourage Nithael to use them on him. Or in him. *Mission focus, soldier.* He shouldn't get distracted, too, or neither of them would ever get close to climax.

When the condom was in place, Nithael ran his fingers over the surface, then wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked slowly. “It feels... interesting. New.”

“Should I leave you to it, then? I can focus my energies elsewhere...” Craig reached for the lube and brought it close to hand.

“What? No. I want to feel your mouth first, through this.”

A tight ball of liquid-hot desire dropped through Craig's stomach to coil through his pelvis. He loved the intimacy of bringing his partner pleasure with his mouth. He pumped some lube into his gloved hand to warm the cool liquid, then took hold of Nithael's cock with the other and leaned down to lick from base to tip.

Nithael let out a shuddering exhale. “A bit harder. It's—It still feels—” He cut off as Craig licked again, pressing harder. “Yes. That's *very* good. I want to try that with you.”

The desire in Craig's pelvis coalesced and pooled at the base of his cock, making it thicken at the image of that pretty, expressive mouth, being full of him. “Please. Let me show you how.”

He licked up and over the tip of Nithael's cock, then ran his tongue around the head before taking it into his mouth and sucking on it. Nithael let out the most perfect groan, and his hands went to Craig's hair, catching at the short strands. The hot desire deep in Craig's body flared into burning heat, and he sucked harder, taking Nithael's cock further into his mouth.

“That's—That's—” was all Nithael could gasp out before his words broke down again.

Resisting the urge to drop his free hand between his own legs, Craig teased under Nithael's balls instead, timing a brush of his fingers with a deep stroke, all the way to the back of his throat. Nithael's response was breathtaking, a twitch that stopped just short of being a thrust and a sharp, needy cry that had Craig's heart racing.

And when he pushed his fingertip inside Nithael's body, that cry shattered into “Yes” and “More” and then into soft, needy moans. Any thought Craig had of going slowly turned to ash, and it took all his self-control to hold off long enough for Nithael's body to relax around first one finger, then two.

“Craig. Craig, I want...”

Lightheaded at the spike of need that followed hearing his name, Craig lifted his head and licked his lips as he looked up the length of Nithael's body. All of his scientific focus was gone, replaced by blown pupils and a desperate, needy gaze. God, he was gorgeous to see like this.

“I know, hon,” Craig said as he eased his fingers out, stripped off the glove, then slid the condom off Nithael’s cock. He nearly asked if Nithael wanted to put a condom on him, but he suspected that would be too much. Instead, he put the new condom on himself with quick, light motions, and then slicked the surface with more lubricant. He wanted this to be perfect for Nithael—for both of them.

And it was. He eased into Nithael’s body almost effortlessly, and Nithael canted his hips and wrapped his legs around Craig’s back, encouraging him to go as deep as he could. Sparks of power crawled over his skin, making him shiver. He wrapped his still-slick hand around Nithael’s cock and stroked, and the shift of Nithael’s body as he shuddered caused Craig’s vision to white out in a shock of pure pleasure.

For once, he wasn’t pulled out of the moment and thrown into a different reality. All he felt was the combination of a deep satiation and a sharp, electric need that coursed through him and bound his consciousness to the reality of his body in the present.

And that reality was nothing but Nithael, which felt so very *right*. He thrust deep and out and back in again, and a charged thrill shot through him as their connection ran from his hand to his cock to his mouth as he pressed it to Nithael’s. It built and filled him, stealing his breath, and the energy galvanized him in a rush of pleasure that washed over him and through him in a wave of blindingly bright heat. The feeling of Nithael trembling beneath him and around him cut through his own selfish pleasure, and he found the willpower to stroke hard and fast, just as Nithael liked most.

Distantly, he heard Nithael moan, and as the last tremors shot through him, he thrust hard and twisted his hand, moving up and down. He was rewarded with a sudden gasp that broke into a cry. Energy flared around them both, making every one of Craig’s hairs stand on end, as Nithael’s body clenched tight around him.

“That’s it,” Craig whispered as warmth spilled over his hand. “I’ve got you, babe.”

Nithael blinked his eyes open, looking dazed and sated. He smiled and practically purred, “Mmm, yes. That was *very* nice.”

Craig laughed, the sheer joy in him pouring out, and collapsed onto Nithael’s chest. “You could say that.”

Chapter 6

Sweats, one pair of jeans, underwear, socks, a couple of T-shirts. Not a bad haul, Craig thought as he turned into his neighborhood. Clothes had been easier than a substantial vegan diet that would keep Nithael healthy—biostabilization system notwithstanding—and not bore him to death. Admittedly, when in science-mode, Nithael could probably eat sawdust and not notice, but Craig had his hopes of teaching Nithael to take pleasure in things other than experimentation or discovery. Besides, a steady diet of peanut butter wasn't healthy.

The brakes squealed as he approached the stop sign at his corner. He'd have to get the pads checked—

Thoughts of the mechanic and his shopping trip vanished under a quick rush of power that flooded his brain, as if a dam had suddenly burst. He saw a powder blue car in the driveway at his house—his grandfather's vintage '57 Chevy, lovingly maintained, one owner from new.

A mental *push* cleared the vision away, fast enough that the driver behind him didn't even honk. A little shaken by the flash-speed of the foresight, Craig went through the intersection, driving mechanically. An unregulated, unplanned vision would've normally knocked him on his ass. He'd spent years terrified of having one while driving, until concentrating on blocking them had become second nature. So why had this one actually slipped through?

Nithael. It had to be. Nithael had said their energy was complementary. If Craig's subconscious understood and accepted that, maybe it was allowing visions through, because they *wouldn't* make him black out, risking a dangerous accident.

Hell, had his mind somehow held the vision until he'd reached the stop sign? Maybe.

He pulled up to the house in time to see his grandfather get out of the car, carrying a messenger bag over one shoulder. Despite his advanced years, he stood tall and strong, with perfect vision for everything but reading, and had never had a moment's difficulty renewing his driver's license. And instead of turning to go up the walkway to the front door, he walked down to the foot of the driveway, eyes fixed on Craig's car, as if he'd timed their arrival to coincide.

Then again, he probably had.

Craig pulled into the driveway, careful to leave three feet of space between his car and the precious baby-blue paint. He shut off the engine and got out to greet his grandfather. "You came."

Gramps walked up and engulfed him in a tight hug. "You wanted me to."

"Well, yeah..." It was true, but in a more abstract way than this. Craig wondered if Nithael was able to amplify his connection with Grampa Ellis as well as breaking down the internal barriers to his gift. "I just didn't get the message until a minute ago. Nithael will be surprised. But delighted," he hastened to add, as he pulled away slightly and patted Gramps on the back.

Gramps kept one arm around Craig's shoulders as he turned toward the house. "That's your young fella?"

Craig ducked out from under Gramps's arm and went to open the back door of his car to retrieve his shopping bags. "He's not *that* young. He's thirty—or that's what he calculated, since time doesn't run the same way 'over there.' He just feels young." He handed the clothes bags to his grandfather and grabbed the groceries. "But yes. He's 'my fella.'"

The slow smile on Grampa Ellis's face made Craig look away, then back again. "Good. That's how it works, then? His fix-it job on you?"

His face heating up, Craig ushered Gramps to the front door. "We are *not* talking about the mechanics of this. But yes, it's an emotional connection based on touch. He'll show you his energy diffusion system, I'm sure."

Grampa's arm went around Craig's shoulder again, patting it as they climbed the steps, side by side. "Looking forward to it, kiddo."

Craig set down the groceries to unlock the door, then stuck his head in to call out, "Nithael, honey! We have company! Please tell me you're wearing pants..." Only when he was sure it was safe did he open it the rest of the way and gesture for Grampa Ellis to enter.

He grabbed the groceries and walked quickly through to the kitchen to set them down and scan the rooms for anything embarrassing before Gramps came through. Nithael was too enamored with the bed to want to fuck anywhere else, so at least there wasn't lube or condom packets lying around.

At the foot of the stairs he called again. "Babe? You busy?"

“Cat wants *something* in the sink, but I can’t figure out what!” Nithael yelled back. There was an echo to his voice that implied he was in the upstairs bathroom.

Laughing, Craig climbed halfway up so he didn’t have to yell so loud. “She wants you to turn on the faucet so she can drink. Don’t. Just come down and meet Gramps.”

“She’s very insistent,” Nithael said a second before he appeared at the top of the steps. He was wearing the too-large swim trunks that served as temporary shorts and one of Craig’s T-shirts. It was both ridiculous and adorable.

“Come here, love. Contrary to popular belief, she doesn’t get everything she wants.” Craig held out his hand to Nithael.

“You did say she runs the household,” Nithael said as he came down the stairs. He took hold of Craig’s hand as soon as he was in reach, then smiled at Grampa Ellis.

Nodding, Gramps said, “My Charlie is the boss at my house. We serve cats and clean up after them, and then we wonder why they treat us like the help.”

“She’s very intelligent,” Nithael said. It was, Craig had learned, his highest compliment.

Craig brought Nithael over to Gramps, who had put his laptop bag down between two tall, messy piles of papers with pages scattered around them on the coffee table and floor. “Gramps, this is Nithael, from the *Cathair*. Nithael, this is my Grampa Ellis. The foreseer.”

Gramps held out his hand with a wide, generous smile that crinkled his eyes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nithael of the *Cathair*.”

Instead of accepting the handshake, Nithael pulled back, asking, “Are you stable? I don’t want to disrupt your energy.”

Glancing at Craig, then making eye contact with Nithael once more, Grampa’s voice softened as he said, “Thanks for your concern, but yes. I’ve always had very stable energy around my gift.”

Nithael relaxed and clasped his hand. “We’re still learning our tolerances. This is the longest Craig’s left me. I wasn’t certain the energy buildup would—though I *could* calculate it—”

Leaning over to catch Nithael’s eye before they lost him to equations for the rest of the afternoon, Craig said, “Darling, you already grounded yourself on me when I walked you down the stairs.”

"I... did, yes." Nithael tipped his head, looking distantly in Craig's direction without focusing. "I should factor that into the calculations. Determine the minimum time required for positive safe grounding."

Craig grinned sheepishly at Gramps. "Still a lot to figure out. Namely, how to keep the scientist occupied. Takes a lot of paper and snacks."

"You brought snacks?" Nithael interrupted before Craig could say anything else.

Unable to keep the triumphant grin off his face, Craig nodded, turning to wink subtly at Gramps. "Yep. Tons. Shall we?" He gestured towards the kitchen, allowing Grampa to lead the way.

Over his shoulder, Gramps said, "Let's. I missed elevenses on the way up."

"Cat's still in the sink," Nithael said, a hint of worry creeping into his voice.

The grin on Craig's face from Grampa's remark got even wider at Nithael's. This was his life. What a gift. He offered his arm to his "fella" as he said, "She'll come down when the snacks appear."

Craig turned back from rinsing their "elevenses" dishes to see Nithael waving his hand—dark as ink, with his nano-tattoo—an inch over Cat's back. She was crouched down like a sphinx, purring her heart out, and would have looked beautifully dignified if not for the way her fur stood on end, rippling in waves that matched the motion of Nithael's fingers.

"Cats have always been sensitive—Charlie knows every time I have a vision—but this..." Grampa Ellis said, grinning, "this is feline tolerance at a whole new level."

"She likes this much better than being brushed," Nithael said.

"Nithael's gift is much different than ours, Gramps." Craig walked over to kiss Nithael's head, then sat down facing Grampa Ellis.

"What gift—or, path, did you say?" Grampa Ellis asked.

"Path, yes," Nithael said, flexing his fingers as the tattoo receded back up his arm. "Technomancy. Human-machine interface, Craig called it once?"

"You sort of *are* the interface, love." Craig squeezed Nithael's knee under the table. He wasn't aware of how strong the need to touch was until there was someone else to notice.

“And the... tattoo helps with that?” Grampa’s eyes were mild and curious, trained on Nithael’s face.

“They’re nanoaetheric sensors: microscopic machines, though there’s a level of swarm-intelligence to them,” Nithael explained.

“Aetheric—that’s the type of ‘energy’ that we’d call ‘magic,’ isn’t it?”

Nithael’s grin brightened his eyes and lit up his face. “Yes.”

Grampa Ellis grinned right back. “And that’s what gave you those streaks in your hair? Exposure to aetheric energy?”

“Yes. The more time I spent in my lab, the more my hair turned silver. But how did you know?”

Grampa Ellis smiled at Craig. “My pops was almost completely gray by forty.”

Craig wondered how long it would take his own hair to go gray, with the uptick in energy transfer and use in this household. When he looked over at Gramps to ask when he’d gone gray, he saw—and felt—that there was a reason Gramps had come to visit besides “meet the boy.”

He turned to Nithael, who was focused on Cat. “Don’t turn her gray too, babe. Why don’t you go upstairs and try on the clothes I got you?”

“She likes it,” Nithael protested, though he stopped the tattoo that was crawling back down his hand. This time, he petted Cat the conventional way as he stood up. “Should I put her back in the upstairs sink?”

Craig shook his head. “She’ll just end up following you to the bedroom anyway.”

Nithael nodded and brushed his hand over Craig’s shoulder. “Cat,” he called, though she was already on her feet.

“Don’t take off any of the tags just yet, in case we need to return stuff,” Craig added.

“Tags?” Nithael’s eyes narrowed. He’d quickly developed a powerful distaste of T-shirt tags, though he had yet to figure out how to cut them off at the stitching without harming the shirt. Instead he just wore them inside out.

“Just price tags. If the clothes fit, you can take off all the tags you want. Or I can help.”

Nithael huffed disdainfully, though he nodded again. When he left the room, Cat followed him out.

Looking over at Gramps with a fond smile he couldn't banish, Craig said, "So, that's Nithael..."

Gramps pursed his lips, but his eyes were all smile lines. "Yes, so it is. An odd sort of charm, though pleasant."

Craig nodded. Getting approval from Gramps never felt like something he'd needed before, but hearing that, something loosened in his chest. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I was going to ask how serious you two were, but I think I don't need to."

Feeling a blush creep up his cheeks, Craig narrowly kept himself from sounding about fifteen when he responded, "We stabilize each other. You know how long I've been looking for that. I'm not gonna let it go that easy."

Grampa Ellis nodded. "You *can* block it, you know—if that's the only reason you two are together. I've been digging—"

"It's not. Or, that's only the beginning of why our connection is so important. But it's not need-based. I want this, Gramps." Craig didn't mean to sound so adamant, but he hadn't felt so strongly about something—someone—in his memory. And if anyone needed to understand that, it was Grampa.

"I know, kiddo. I can see it," Grampa Ellis said, holding up his hand. "I just had to put it out there. And now, we can forget about it and get to the important stuff."

Craig let out a deep breath that he hadn't noticed he'd been holding. "And that is...?"

Grampa Ellis leaned to the side and pulled something out of the back pocket of his jeans. It was a folded piece of paper that he offered to Craig. "That's the nearest portal back to the *Cathair*. Your fella will want that, so he can introduce you to his family, go home for visits, all that."

Wide-eyed, Craig took the paper and unfolded it to find a map of Bear Mountain State Park, which was about two hours away. The family used to go camping there every summer when he was young. There was a point marked in red to one side of a hiking trail. He looked up from the page, momentarily terrified Nithael wouldn't come back if he left. But that was just the remnant emotion from that vision of him leaving, not based in the reality of their situation.

“Okay. Right. Thanks...”

Not that Craig's matter-of-fact tone of voice fooled his grandfather for a moment. “It's *right* that he knows this,” he said, tapping the corner of the page.

“No, of course. I wouldn't keep it from him. He has to *want* to stay, or there's no way this will work.” Craig set the map down on the table and slid it to the side, leaving it unfolded and visible from the doorway. “Thanks. I mean it.”

“That's my boy,” Grampa Ellis approved. “Now, you two will at least want to call the portal guardians who live there. I have their numbers programmed into my phone; don't let me leave without giving them to you. They can help set your fella up with whatever he needs to integrate. Money exchange from whatever resources he has on the other side, ID papers, all that. That is... I'm assuming you two are going to stay here?”

Craig gawped at Gramps for a moment. Then he remembered to close his mouth. “You... I dunno. We haven't really talked about it yet. I keep meaning to, but he gets distracted, and...” And Craig was a coward. And the idea of having to choose seemed unfair to both him and Nithael. “He's got a lab back home, but I don't wanna be... Do you think our connection”—he gestured to himself and his grandfather—“would span the distance?”

“Not sure. But I know it's a heck of a lot easier for your boy to move here than for you to go there. As I understand it, there's a population problem over there.”

“Nithael said they have a water shortage.” Craig couldn't help but smile. “He took his first bath the other day. You've never seen someone so in heaven.”

Grampa Ellis's laugh came out more like a cough. “I'll leave that to you.”

For what felt like the umpteenth time that day, Craig's face got hot. “Sorry, yeah. Point is, sometimes I wonder if he only loves me for my hot water.”

Love. That was an unintentional slip. They hadn't used that word yet, though Craig had caught himself on the verge of thinking it before. Felt weird to say it to Gramps first.

“You think that, you're not paying attention to how he looks at you,” Grampa Ellis said with a huff. “You're that boy's whole world—even more than Cat.”

Craig huffed back, even as he was dumbstruck by Grampa's observation. He didn't even know how to begin acknowledging something like that. The possibility that it was true shot a tingle down his spine. "Well, I *have* noticed that I lost a pet when I gained a partner. She's his shadow now."

"Speaking of which," Grampa Ellis said, an odd twinkle coming to his eye, "how's he get along with Flower?"

"He mentioned something about reprogramming him once, whatever that means, but really, Nithael doesn't leave the house much." Or at all. But Craig didn't want Gramps to think Nithael was a complete oddball. At least, not yet.

"You might want to let him get at that. Turns out that my pops had to get permission to bring him here, back when you were little. Or haven't you wondered what he's doing, still up and on his hooves after all these years?"

"I figured he just didn't die out of spite. But now that you mention it, he called Flower a synth the moment he saw him." Craig wondered how often Pawpaw went home, whether it was allowed with some frequency, and how difficult it was to get used to. "Should we take him back, you think?"

"See if your fella can't do something about him. Make him over into a critter that looks new." Grampa Ellis chuckled, adding, "Maybe a little less ornery."

"I'll see what I can do." Craig put it on his mental list of projects to keep Nithael busy. When he got bored, he started taking electronics apart. "Anyway. You might be right. About staying here. Might be better."

"I'm glad you said that. I didn't see you leaving, but..." Grampa Ellis shrugged and fell silent, turning, as Craig heard footsteps on the stairs.

"I don't like socks," Nithael said as he walked into the kitchen. He was wearing the new jeans, which didn't fit too badly, and holding a pair of white socks in his hand. He'd also skipped putting on a shirt.

"You will in the wintertime, when you have to wear shoes. Didn't any of the shirts fit?" Craig secretly thought it was a shame to cover up that torso, but he was trying to train Nithael to remember that nudity wasn't acceptable in public.

"I like your shirts better," Nithael said, voice coming close to a whine. "They're softer."

"But they're too big for you. The blue one with the circles and the star on it is soft. The point was to see if what I bought fit."

"The jeans are also too..." Nithael waved a hand at them. "Why can't I just wear your shorts?"

"Because they want to fall off you when you aren't looking."

"That might be the point, kiddo," Grampa Ellis said as if he were being helpful.

Nithael blinked, then slowly smiled. "That *is* true."

Craig would have raised his hands to cover his burning face if they both hadn't been looking at him. He would not admit to either of them that he only wanted that to happen when he *was* looking. Instead, he gave his best soldierly glare. "I bought you a pair of sweatpants. Those will do at home. We'll keep the jeans for when you leave the house."

"We don't have to leave. You had that boxed food delivered. We can just do that," Nithael said hopefully.

Turning to Gramps, Craig smirked. "Nithael just discovered Chinese food."

Nithael nodded. "It's very inefficient to eat with those sticks or conventional tableware, but if you wrap it in leaves or a tortilla, it stays together nicely, even when writing."

"We'll order moo shu tofu next time, hon. Go try on the sweats and that blue shirt."

Nithael started undoing the fly as he turned. Fully expecting the jeans to be off before Nithael reached the bottom of the stairs, Craig refused to watch. Instead, he turned back to his highly amused grandfather.

"You've got your hands full with that one, huh?" Gramps asked.

"Just a bit." Craig winked at Gramps and smiled as he stood. "Nothing I can't handle, somehow. Come on, lemme show you to your room. You're at least staying the night, right?"

"Absolutely. I didn't come all this way to get thrown out," Gramps teased. "I'll just get my laptop set up. Wireless password the same?"

"Yep. Knock yourself out. I'll go get your suitcase. You're in the office, 'cause the bed in there should have clean sheets." Craig didn't mention that it was also close to the second full bathroom and a floor away from where he and Nithael slept. He didn't have to.

“Take your time. Go make sure your boy remembers to put on pants.” Gramps patted Craig’s shoulder, then went out to the living room to get his laptop bag.

Knowing that could be a long and involved process, Craig went out to get the suitcase first. He couldn’t help smiling at the way Nithael had charmed Gramps with his naiveté and unselfconscious brilliance. It didn’t hurt that Gramps was one of the more open-minded people Craig had ever known, and he’d never once batted an eyelash over the people Craig had chosen to date, no matter what their gender expression. He found himself looking forward to Grampa’s visit, especially since it had been a long while since they’d shared space. They talked often, but there was something really comforting about being near each other.

Not to the level of being in contact with Nithael, but just being around someone else with a gift had always helped ease the constant low-level anxiety he had lived with up until a few days ago.

Thank God—or all of the gods in all dimensions—for Nithael.

As he pulled the hardside rolling suitcase from the Chevy’s trunk, Craig thought about how he’d accidentally used the word “love” earlier. It seemed absurd when he counted days—not even a week!—that he could be thinking in those terms already, but he knew emotional states weren’t governed by time. Besides, Craig was almost certain Nithael wouldn’t have any preconceived notions about the weight placed on that term by this dimension’s cultural norms. It was just a feeling, after all. And it was an accurate one.

He dropped the suitcase in the living room and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor to find Nithael. He was in their bedroom wearing the Captain America shirt and the new sweatpants. Cat was already doing her part to make sure Craig couldn’t return anything to the store, shedding her fur all over Nithael as he petted her.

“She doesn’t like the jeans, either,” Nithael said without looking up.

Craig pressed his lips together to keep himself from smirking. “Fine, but we *are* keeping them for special occasions.” He walked up to the bed and sat down next to Nithael, then kissed his temple. “You all right? You look good in that shirt.”

“I like your grandfather. He really does have very stable energy.” Nithael frowned slightly, turning to watch as Cat crossed his lap and went to demand attention from Craig. “Should I have told him that?”

“You could have—he would’ve taken it as a compliment—but it’s fine that you didn’t. Besides, he’s sticking around for a day or two, so you still have a chance.” Craig’s knuckles rubbed Cat’s chin, but his eyes didn’t stray from Nithael’s face.

Nithael smiled and inched closer, being careful not to upset Cat. “That’s good. You probably need to associate with people other than me. Most people do.”

A careful twist of his torso meant Craig could wrap his arm around Nithael’s shoulders while still petting Cat. “That’s true of everyone, darling. You included. But I was more looking forward to having you hang out with him. Gramps has always been my safe space, until you, so he’s the important one for you to meet.”

“No, I meant—” Nithael shook his head. “*You* need people other than me. Everyone I’ve ever worked with agrees that it’s important to take a break from associating with me.”

Craig thought he’d already addressed this, but he was willing to explain it again. “One, I’m not working with you. And two, I get breaks when you fall into a calculations hole. I’m doing fine, hon. Totally not bored with you yet.” He smiled fondly and hugged Nithael’s shoulder to his side.

Nithael looked away. “I hope you—” he began, then frowned. “You’ll tell me when you do, won’t you?”

Letting go of Cat to turn Nithael’s face towards him, Craig said, “Hey, babe, come on. I’m pretty sure that won’t happen. Isn’t that kind of how this works? You are the best thing for me. And being around you makes me not just more functional but *better*.”

“I’ve been working on calculating the minimum exposure necessary to keep us both stable. That should help.”

Trying not to sigh, Craig shifted so he was facing Nithael, which made Cat growl and huffily hop off his lap. “That might be important if we ever have to travel without the other one.” Craig tried hard not to think about Nithael going home without him. “But aren’t there more important things to be figuring out?”

“Not that I know of. Keeping you—well, both of us—stable is my priority. Did I miss something?” Nithael asked worriedly.

Craig was starting to feel like he was on less-sure footing, which was mildly terrifying. “*We are* stable, sweetheart. Because we like spending time together.

Unless you've decided you need more alone time or something, I think I'm the one not getting it."

"No. Not at all. It's for when you need to get away from me."

Taking Nithael's face in both his hands and realizing how much he needed the contact to ground him, Craig found his voice came out a little more insistent than he'd meant it to be. "I don't need that, Nithael. I don't want it. It makes me crazy inside to even think about it. Please stop saying it."

"It's not—" Nithael shook his head again and covered Craig's hands with his own. "Craig, *nobody* wants to be around me too much. It's not you. It's me. I'd rather calculate how often you can safely leave *before* you get tired of being with me at all."

"Don't you understand how upsetting that is?" Craig took hold of Nithael's hands and held them tightly in his lap. "I *want* to be with you, Nithael. I want that so much, it physically hurts to think about us being apart. Hell, today Gramps showed me a map to the nearest portal, and I panicked at the thought that you'd want to leave."

"But—"

Craig cut in, "Not done yet. Whatever it takes so we can be together, I'll do it—even if it means you have to keep going back for your work or family or whatever else. Even if it means we have to figure out how I can go there, to be with you."

"And I want to be with you," Nithael said earnestly, "which is why I *don't* want you to get tired of me. Everyone does."

"I'm not *everyone*."

That got a faint, sad smile. "Well, no. You're... special. A singularly unique person."

Breathing a sigh of relief and cracking a smile, Craig responded, "Great, then stop treating me like I'm not, or you actually *are* going to annoy me for the first time ever."

"But I don't want you to stop liking me," Nithael protested. "Craig... nobody has *ever* mattered to me like this. It's not just because we stabilize each other. You're... important."

That sounded big, coming from Nithael. It made the tightness in Craig's chest ease a little further. He leaned forward and rested his head on Nithael's

shoulder. "Thank fuck. I was sure you were working up to say you didn't even like me, let alone love me."

Nithael put a hand on the back of Craig's neck. "Of course, I love you. That's obvious, Craig. You're a very easy person to love."

Craig dragged in a deep breath and let it out on a laugh. It was the kind of laugh that could have been crying if something hadn't shifted at a critical moment. Even so, tears stung his eyes at the near miss, and his shoulders shook in about the same way they would have if it hadn't been joy spilling out of him. "Christ, Nithael. Why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't want you to feel pressured," Nithael explained as if that were the most logical thing in the world.

Baffled and raising his head to look into Nithael's sincere eyes, Craig said, "But... How was it not obvious that I love you?"

Nithael's hands tightened on Craig's. "Because that's ridiculous, Craig. The qualities that make me the top of my field as a theoretical technomancer also make me the *worst* candidate for an emotional relationship. You're really better off falling in love with Cat."

Beautiful, idiotic genius of a man. "Huh, okay. Let me make this perfectly clear. I love you, Nithael, and I want to be with you. I enjoy your company, and I share space well with you. I have never felt more physically and emotionally comfortable with anyone, let alone a romantic partner. I want to be around you, not just because you help to stabilize my energy, but because you make me happy."

The frown returned, full of distress. "I do? How? What am I doing right?"

"Baby, that's—"

"No. No, you need to tell me, so I can keep doing it. Or *not* doing it. Maybe make a list? I do much better with guidelines. Not rules," he added head tipping to the side. "I tend to disregard most rules, which is why it's considered hazardous to work in my lab, but guidelines—especially for something this important... That would help."

Craig's grin got wider with every word that came out of Nithael's ridiculous, perfect mouth. "One simple guideline: continue being your completely adorable self. That's it. Real simple."

"One of my instructors once said I could irritate an entire building full of people by walking past the entry doors."

“Were you doing it naked? Because if so, ‘irritate’ is not the appropriate English word.” Craig smirked and leaned in close so his nose was almost brushing Nithael’s.

“Nudity wouldn’t have that effect,” Nithael said, voice dropping to a near-whisper. “It did inspire me to develop an aetheric field disruptor that has the effect of causing hallucinations and nightmares—”

“Focus, love. And kiss me.”

“Yes. I think I’d like to.”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, babe.”

Nithael blinked once in surprise. Then, smiling, he tilted his head and kissed Craig, softly and sweetly. Only the tight grip of his hands betrayed the emotion he was so good at hiding—even from himself.

As the kiss ended, Craig pulled one hand free and touched Nithael’s cheek. “We can’t get distracted now. Let’s go find out what Gramps wants for dinner. Then we can talk more about this portal and what to do about it.”

“If... If you wouldn’t object, I rather like it here. Granted, I’d like a proper lab, but I can bring much of my equipment across. But otherwise, I’d miss Cat. And baths. And you did mention those bigger bathtubs...”

Craig laughed at what really should have been a predictable response. “Jacuzzis. I’ve got some money saved up, and I’ll start getting my retirement in a few months. Yeah, we can get a Jacuzzi.”

Nithael grinned. “I promise, I won’t use it for any experiments.”

“Mmm, I can think of a few we should try.” Craig leaned in for one more quick kiss, reminding himself not to get distracted. “But we have plenty of time together, love—our whole future.”

The End

Author Bio

Ray Van Fox spends way too much time in front of a computer, but at least fifty percent of it is spent actually writing. Ray grew up in Chicago, came out in Iowa, changed pronouns in Seattle, and finds family in queerness.

Jordan S. Brock has been writing for close to four decades and plans to keep at it for at least four more. Jordan's writing spans from unpublished sci-fi/fantasy epics to fanfiction to published romance under another name.

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