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The ride to GreatHouse T'Ash Residence had been silent. Cratag had sat stiffly in the luxurious back seat of the Hawthorn Family glider. Though there had been no shield between him and the driver, another Family member, Cratag hadn't spoken. The driver's manner had held a slight pity that set Cratag's teeth on edge. It wasn't only himself who believed this outside job was more like a demotion.

T'Ash's greeniron gates had opened and the Residence had come into view, a large pale yellow building of curves and jutting shapes. The newest fortress of the FirstFamilies, in an equally new style. It was made of armorcrete and the shields were the best. The gliderway was smooth, without any dips or bumps and the driver was as competent in his profession as Cratag was in his. Their lord didn't promote fools.

But that hadn't stopped their lord from assigning Cratag to another household. Cratag had to meet GreatLady D'Hazel and be gracious to her even while he resented her. At least the scars on his face helped keep his expression unreadable.

T'Hawthorn had indicated that D'Marigold would be here and that was the only bright thing in this whole cloudy mess. He remembered her from a single meeting a few years ago, but he had little hope that she'd recall him. Would she be frightened of him – his size and his aspect? Women often were, common and noble. Those who lived in Druida were accustomed to excellent Healing care that left minimal scars, particularly on the face. The slash from his jaw to his nose – his obviously once broken nose – was white from a slicing claw of a now dead slashtip. The smaller claw punctures were less noticeable.

Cratag followed T'Ash's butler down the carpeted hallway. He was much more friendly than T'Hawthorn's butler, and from the general looks of the Residence, it seemed like the house and the Family were more casual.

A cold chill slicked his gut. The only Family he'd known, the only Residence, was T'Hawthorn's. He'd have to adapt to a new place, something he'd never anticipated he'd have to do again. D'Marigold's household couldn't possibly run along the lines of T'Hawthorn's.

Soon he would see her.

He was led to an office suite, then through it, the odor of animals in the air. Obviously the animal healer's, portion of the house. Danith D'Ash was also the person who matched rare Fams with Nobles.

The butler opened the door and announced him.

Cratag's gaze sought D'Marigold immediately. She looked more ethereal than ever. Too damn thin. He shifted his shoulders. They'd do something about that. That last particular thought reconciled him to the whole situation. D'Marigold's hair was pale gold, her eyes a summer blue, her lips soft and pink.

Vinni cleared his throat.

Cratag figured he'd stared too long at her, and moved his gaze to the Hazels, mother and daughter. The GreatLady was gazing at him, too. She seemed unsurprised at his size and scars, but he hadn't seen her reaction when he'd entered.

He had seen D'Marigold's, whose eyes had widened, but she hadn't flinched, a good sign.

The little girl said, "You are going to be our bodyguard, Mother told me." She smiled.

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"You look big and strong. How did you get those scars?"

D'Hazel closed her eyes. "Personal comment, Avellana."

"No it wasn't. It was a question."

"It was a question about his personal appearance. We have discussed this before." More than anger was in the woman's tone, distress, too, as if she feared for her daughter's mind or memory.