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Note: Cratag Maytree, the head of lord T'Hawthorn's guards, has been assigned bodyguard duty at Signet D'Marigold's. He has returned from there to his rooms at T'Hawthorn's residence. The heir of the Hawthorns, **Laev** is seventeen and is like a younger brother to Cratag. **Beadle** is Cratag's new Familiar Companion, a cat.

**Passage** is a fugue that frees the psi power/magic, Flair.

## *chapter 6*

Cratag brooded on the way back to T'Hawthorn's Residence, mostly about Signet D'Marigold.

The more he was in the lady's presence, the more he felt as if there were faint waves pulsing from her. He knew it was a foolish idea, but he couldn't shake it. Perhaps all nobles gave off emanations of Flair and he was just too dull to feel them. Maybe he was more attuned to D'Marigold because...because he was attracted to her. So, he acknowledged it. That didn't mean anything, wouldn't change anything.

Being careful of his speech and his accent and his manners around so many nobles wore on him.

The clouds had blown away with the strong wind and the day turned from shades of gray to blue and yellow.

Beadle was stretched out on Cratag's bed, snoozing with all four paws up and white furred belly exposed while Cratag stood staring at his duffle and the many clothes he'd somehow gotten in the past four years. How had that happened? There were the sturdy workclothes – some in T'Hawthorn's livery – that were bespelled and didn't wear out easily. There were clothes for sparring, and better clothes to wear out in the city, and a bunch of ritual clothes. When had he acquired four sets of tunic and trouser ritual robes? A couple even had fancy braid.

Well, yeah, he recalled the damn white on white brocade that was a bitch to clean, spells or no, that he'd worried about getting blood or food on. T'Hawthorn, as Captain of all the Councils, had led a Winter Solstice ritual at GreatCircle Temple and Cratag had been his bodyguard.

He'd seen D'Marigold at that ritual, too, hadn't he? He snorted. He might hide his feelings from everyone else, but it wasn't wise to hide them from himself. Of course he had noticed her.

Learning to accept his fate was something he'd always struggled with.

Staring at the white ritual robe he recalled that he'd had a fizz of excitement when dressing in it – because he was sure he'd glimpse D'Marigold. She always participated in the important quarterly rituals at GreatCircle Temple. He snorted at the memory. He'd still had a summer tan and had thought the white would look good on him, maybe attract a female – D'Marigold's – eye. Instead when he put it on, he saw the white was the same color as the scars on his face. It was the last time he'd cared about the ritual robes that T'Hawthorn gave him.

She'd seen him that night, he recalled. She, too, had been dressed in white and it had accented her pale coloring – her light blond hair, her summer blue eyes, her pale skin with the hint of rose in her cheeks. She'd looked like a winter goddess.

Disgusted with himself, Cratag packed some old sets of work clothes, a couple of newer

tunics and trous, several sparring robes, a set of generic purple with gold trim ritual robes – T'Hawthorn's colors – which looked like hell on him, and a set of more fashionable clothes he wore for dress up. Underwear. That should be enough.

Another bag for his weapons – sleeve and ankle knives, some throwing discs, his tri-blazer case, and some long daggers – and he was ready. He exchanged his regular sword with his best, buckled the belt and settled the sheath at his hip.

There was a rapping on his door, Laev's knock. Did the young man know that Cratag was leaving? What did he think?

Cratag opened the door and Laev flung his arms around him in a hug, surprising both of them. Hawthorns didn't often display affection. Cratag hugged Laev hard, feeling how he was filling out from boy to man. Laev seemed to be sending off waves of emotion or something. Strange. Definitely a strange day.

Though they'd often talked in Cratag's room, now it seemed dark and cramped as he recalled the bright and spacious suite he had at D'Marigold's. A view of gardens tipped with light green spring growth instead of a paved and walled courtyard.

Laev stepped back and Cratag let him go. He searched the face of this young man he'd raised as much as the Hawthorns. Cratag believed he was the one to whom Laev told his hopes and fears and dreams. He loved Laev like a son – or a younger brother.

At thirty-four, Cratag would have been very promiscuous in the southern village he came from to have a son of seventeen.

"I hear you're leaving us for a little while," Laev said, his words rushed.

Cratag frowned, gestured to his bags that took up most of his bedspace, then said. "We'll speak of it in your rooms."

Laev nodded jerkily. Cratag narrowed his eyes, lately the boy had been clumsier than usual for a young man coming into his growth. "Or maybe we should see whether you've learned those fighting moves Tab Holly has been trying to teach you." Fighting was the best lesson for coordination around.

Grinning, Laev rubbed his hands. "Now you're talking." He glanced at Beadle. "You got a cat!" Laev went over and rubbed the feline belly. Beadle didn't even open his eyes but purred.

Warmth suffused Cratag, he found himself puffing out his chest. "A Fam."

"A Fam!" Laev's eyebrows rose. The only Fam in Residence was T'Hawthorn's haughty Black Pierre who didn't deign to notice anyone else. Laev cocked an eye at Beadle. "Good thing you're not staying, Black Pierre would eat him for lunch."

Cratag grunted. "Thought we were going to spar."

"Right," Laev swung around and was a mite off balance.

They strode to the nearest workout room in the castle, only a few doors down. As far as he was concerned, two sparring rooms were too few, though one was a converted ballroom and good and large. He frowned. D'Marigold Residence must have a fighting room – probably called a salon – wouldn't it?

Soon they were in the minuscule locker room, changing into gear. Laev wrinkled his nose. "Smells in here."

"Not enough ventilation," Cratag said, as always.

"Did I tell you? After my Second Passage, as a gift, FatherSire will let me remodel the Heir'sSuite! We're going to put in a sparring room. New." Laev rubbed his hands again, not a usual gesture for him.

This was the first Cratag had heard of a remodel or a new sparring room. His expression must have given him away because the young man's excitement dimmed. "It's the same design you and I talked about a while back."

Cratag nodded. "Good, and I'm glad you'll have it."

"We'll have it," Laev said.

"Yes." Cratag stowed his clothes tidily in his locker and set his hand on Laev's shoulder as they walked into the room. Laev's shoulder twitched with nerves, and Cratag squeezed it comfortingly...standard gestures between them that settled them both.

They stepped onto the mat and bowed to each other. "Fifth fighting pattern," Cratag said. Laev's class was working on that one at The Green Knight Fencing and Fighting Salon. None of them had mastered it.

An intensity came to Laev's eyes and Cratag readied for the attack, the kick and leg spin. But Laev shot a short jabbing blow instead. Cratag countered and they fought. As always, Cratag modulated his strength. He took some kicks, a fall or two, and gave back as good as he got, teaching with technique Laev could observe.

They circled each other, sweating, adding heavy scent to the already smell-burdened room.

"So tell me about this deal with D'Marigold," Laev said.

Cratag's mind flashed to an image of the woman sitting in her beautiful Residence that so suited her.

Laev took him down, properly pinned him to end the bout, crowed with panting laughter and rolled off Cratag. "I won!"

"Sure you did," Cratag said.

"I did."

"I said so, didn't I?"

Chuckling, Laev said. "It's that D'Marigold. Diverts you."

Cratag stilled. How did the boy know that?

"I've watched you at GreatCircle Temple rituals."