

The morning of lessons on architecture was blessedly broken by a scry from Laev. Cratag excused himself to take the call. He'd been interested enough when the Residence had talked and shown holos of the construction and development of itself, D'Marigold Residence. But after that it had begun going through each FirstFamily Residence, the history of the Earthen place the thing was modeled after, and the Families, and Cratag had gotten bored. He knew all he needed to about the FirstFamilies – who were T'Hawthorn's allies, enemies and neutral. Which Families had any smoldering ill-feelings that might explode into a feud and lead to civil unrest.

He'd have liked to have learned a little more about T'Hawthorn Residence, but at the rate the lecture was going, that would show up a few days from now.

So he slipped away from the downstairs library to his suite and took Laev's scry, with more than one reason for gratitude. The Hawthorn colors of purple and gold, along with a slight tinge of green light, pulsed through the room. Laev's colors.

He strode to the bowl. "Cratag here."

The water droplets above the bowl showed Laev's smiling face, but there was a hint of trials undergone and survived in the backs of his eyes. Another exhalation of relief from Cratag. "You look good, Laev."

Laev stood straighter, his smile brightened, as if Cratag couldn't have said anything more complimentary. Cratag thought he felt – no, did feel – a wave of satisfaction from the seventeen year old. "My first fugue went well." His voice was slightly deeper, more resonant, from emotional storms. "I have more Flair than ever and I think the Hawthorn talent for business will be confirmed." He frowned a little and a distant look came to his eyes. "I think...I think I understand more of the web of the alliances that FatherSire has made."

Then a flashing smile with more warmth than Cratag had ever seen from T'Hawthorn. "And I did a few fighting forms and I believe I'm more flexible, have more strength, even than I did before."

A seventeen year old young man was plenty flexible. Cratag eyed Laev. There did seemed to be some sort of almost colorless waves around the young man. Cratag thought it was his own meager Flair that showed him that. "Could be," he said. "Congratulations on reaching your manhood, Laev HawthornHeir."

Laev beamed. "There will be a huge celebration later." He frowned a little, nodded decisively. "When you're home again. It wouldn't be the same without you."

Cratag's heart squeezed. "Thank you."

Rolling his shoulders, Laev said, "I miss our workouts already. May I have your permission to come there and train with you? FatherSire has given his permission."

Even more emotion choked Cratag. This was a man who would not forget him, who would value him as a part of the Family.

"Of course. Will MidAfternoon Bell work for you? That's when my sessions are scheduled. We run on set schedules here."

Laev raised his brows. "I wouldn't have thought D'Marigold – ah, it's the little one, Avellana."

"Yes." Then Cratag recalled what Signet had said about Laev perhaps triggering Avellana's Passage. He'd consult with Signet, but he wanted to see – to hug the man who had been his younger brother.

While he was considering this, a masculine gleam came to Laev's eye. "And Cratag, I

think, I really think that I connected with my HeartMate!"

That admission tangled Cratag's emotions. Pride that the youngster was growing up and at his achievements, his potential. But also a sharp envy for such a love. He forced a smile.

"Come this afternoon."

"I will." Laev tilted his head, grinned. "The Hawthorn Residence has told me that I only have a few more minutes in my morning break, and that I should eat. Since I'm hungry..."

"See you later," Cratag said gruffly and watched the young man nod as he ended the scry.

Cratag rubbed his head, feeling more helpless than he had in a long time. He didn't know, exactly, what he was doing here, no solid mission. He didn't understand – in his gut – great Flair or Passage or HeartMates.

The place was beautiful but strange, the woman beautiful and strangely compelling.

"Is everything all right with young HawthornHeir? I knew you were worried about his Passage," the very woman Cratag was thinking about said, standing at the threshold of his sitting room. Had he closed the door? He didn't recall it latching, and gravity, or the Residence, might have swung it open.

"Yes, all is well." He let a breath out slowly. "His Passage is coming along smoothly." Cratag hesitated.

"You'd like him to visit here," Signet said.

"Yes, MidAfternoon Bell."

She nodded. "Avellana's Flair seems relatively stable, and my own catalyst Flair doesn't appear to be affecting her yet." Signet raised her brows at him.

Cratag nodded. "Yes, I think I'm being affected by you – by your Flair." Definitely by her and the attraction that vibrated between them. He went on, "My senses seem to be becoming sharper, and my Flair stronger in general." He shrugged. "I don't think even with all the catalyst nature of your Flair my own will increase to much more."

"Maybe not." She smiled at him and knots in his muscles that he hadn't known he'd had untangled. "I'm going to take Avellana to the craft room now." There was a slight lift in her voice as if asking if he'd join them.

"I need to look around the Residence again." Find a room suitable for sparring.

She spread her hands. "Be at home."

But when she left Cratag admitted that he wasn't quite sure who or where or what "home" was.