

ROBIN D. OWENS excerpt of **NOBLE HEART** in the collection **HEARTS AND SWORDS**
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Walker is being tested to determine the strength and the type of his Flair psi magic by T'Ash, for whom he worked. So he knows the household, and, of course, Zanth...the premier tom cat, telepathic animal companion. With attitude. Which is redundant.

Walker cleared his throat. "Can we get on with the testing?"

"Yes, it's cold out here." Danith and T'Ash moved aside from their front door.

Walker entered and nodded to the butler, who was hovering-a man he'd worked with for six years. Then Walker strode into T'Ash's den. T'Ash caught up with him in a few long paces and Danith D'Ash rushed.

"We'll learn what Flair you have during your testing," T'Ash said. He shooed his HeartMate. D'Ash didn't move. "Walker might like me to stay."

"Thank you, Danith, no," Walker said. "I am nervous enough as it is." He gave T'Ash a man-to-man look.

T'Ash said to Danith, "We'll tell you the outcome as soon as testing is done." He glanced at Walker. "I made a deal with her to keep her out of the way-unless you specifically asked her to stay."

"Good deal," Walker said, but now Danith was frowning. He bowed to her. "Thank you for the offer."

"You've always been one of my favorite people," she said.

"Later, Danith." T'Ash gave her a lusty kiss. Walker studied the den. Except for his original interview to be Nuin's tutor/wrangler, he hadn't ever been in the famous room that held the best Flair Testing Stones in the world.

The room itself was octagonal, with a lush carpet in the bold colors that the Ashes favored. The desk was huge and battered, with the most disgusting cat perch he'd ever seen next to it.

As if his thought had conjured up T'Ash's Fam, the cat swaggered through the cat door.

Greetyou, Walk, said Zanth.

"Greetyou, Zanth. I note you have a new emerald stud for your ear. Looks great."

Zanth always expected everyone to notice anything new with regard to his person, and if you didn't, it was the worse for you: a shredded shoe, a nice trous-rub-after Zanth had killed a sewer rat-that would ruin your clothes . . .

Thank you. With one bound Zanth landed on his perch. It didn't even wobble under the weight of the huge cat.

The Ashes broke apart and said their good-byes, something Walker had heard for years. A pang went through him that his time with this Family was lost. The job and life he'd loved had vanished forever, and not by his choice.

He ripped his glance from the couple and sat in the large chair with wide wooden arms.

Zanth folded his front paws under himself and watched Walker through squinty eyes, roughly purring. Each of his tattered ears had an emerald stud, and he wore his famous collar of emeralds.

Walker smiled at the cat slowly, knowing that he could tease Zanth without repercussions. Walker said, "It occurs to me that if I now have enough Flair to become a noble, Danith might give me a Fam."

Zanth stopped purring, opened his eyes.

T'Ash grunted as he went to a cabinet and unlocked it. "Probably get your pick of whoever

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is in the Fam adoption rooms." The GreatLord pulled out a large, ornate box about a meter long and three-quarters of a meter wide. Inside were T'Ash's Testing Stones; sweat dampened Walker's armpits. Thankfully his tunic had spells that absorbed and dissipated sweat. Worth every piece of gilt he'd paid for it.

Still aiming his glance at Zanth, Walker said, "I'm sure there are some very attractive cats in the adoption rooms." He cocked his head, kept his smile bland. "On the other hand, I haven't had a great deal of luck with cats. I may prefer a fox . . . or a dog. Something very loving."

Zanth hissed.

"Quiet, Zanth," T'Ash said absently as he set the box on the arms of Walker's chair, then removed the lid.

Walker's breath hitched in his throat. The Testing Stones were beautiful! Polished egglike rocks of every color, some with glinting sparkles, some dull. He glanced up and found T'Ash grinning.

"Always nice to impress someone I respect," the GreatLord said.

"Yes, I'm impressed, and thanks."

The GreatLord leaned against the front of his desk. He nodded to the stones. "If matters proceed as I expect, I'll be the first to offer you Clovers an alliance."

Walker jerked back as if slammed into his chair. He'd never considered that. Being part of the web of alliances between some of the most important people in the world.