

Heart Mate

Chapter 1

Druida City, Celta, 400 years after Colonization, Summer

Today you will meet your HeartMate. Rand T'Ash's blood thrummed in his temples as he stared at the divination dice that he'd just rolled.

The polished blue-green stones gleamed in the light. The symbols incised on them showed deep red veins, looking like blood. He didn't quite believe the glyphs carved in the twelve-sided pieces of bloodstone and the prophecy they foretold. He'd throw again, to be sure.

The deep emanation of his Flair—his psi power—pulsed through his blood. A few years back he'd created the dice, first choosing the bloodstones, then chiseling and shaping them.

He let the swell of his emotions flow through and from him. A tingle of premonition shivered up his spine. He focused his will and mage power. With a flick of his wrist, he threw the dice again. They rolled, spun, stopped.

Today you will meet your HeartMate.

Excitement surged, and an overwhelming tide of triumph. His heart picked up beat. Shimmering tension embedded in his nerves.

T'Ash sat and gripped his half-empty caff mug between his palms. It was oversized, made by a mage-potter to fit his hands.

The ebb and flow of his preternatural Flair had changed over the last few days, he now realized. The daily divinations had foretold something unusual, signs that he'd overlooked. TwinMoonsday—*Enjoy the moment, for it will pass*; Midweek—*Prepare yourself*; Quert—yesterday, *Restructuring is necessary*.

He stared at the dice once more. *Today you will meet your HeartMate.*

How long he had waited! He was thirty-seven, the sole member of a GreatHouse, the highest rank of Celta. There were only thirteen GreatHouses. His was a colony FirstFamily, the House of the Ash. By the grace of the Lord and Lady, he'd escaped the destruction of his Family by a rival House when he was six years old. By sheer will and determination he hid and lived as a boy in the slums of the worst part of the city—Downwind. He grew strong first to survive, then for vengeance.

Only in the last few years, after he'd reestablished his GreatHouse and started his shop, plying his Flair for mage-gems instead of fighting, had he been able to live life with deliberate ease.

After tomorrow he would never again be alone. An exhilarating, but disturbing thought.

His caff was cold. The pungent scent no longer wafted through the air. He looked around his home workroom. The large desk of gleaming reddwood stood in sharp contrast to the scarred workbenches. On the far wall, behind a protection spell, were his gems and precious metals. In the corner, hidden by deep shadows, was his walk-in vault. It was built large to accommodate a man of his size and magical ability. The vault held a smaller safe containing his most precious possessions, including the necklace. His HeartGift.

T'Ash rose and walked to the vault. After disarming the door with a routine spell Word, he went inside.

His HeartGift. An item created in three days after his last Passage, seventeen years before. It was the third and last Passage that gave mastery of psi powers—rather than just confirming the Flair, then releasing it. And it was the final Passage that indicated HeartMates. In the delirium of that Passage T'Ash's Flair had spiraled to bond with his HeartMate, though he'd never felt the link since.

He placed his palm on the safe and muttered an opening spell and reached for the velvet case. The moment he touched it, urgency swept through him, the HeartGift's power. He grabbed the case, slammed the safe shut, strode out, and armed the vault. He set the round-cornered box in the middle of his largest worktable, positioned in the sunlight.

T'Ash watched with disbelief as his hands trembled when he opened the box. Hands that had firmly swung a broadsword, hands that had steadily fixed tiny jewels in a tracery of delicate chains—still, his fingers shook.

Energy, power, magic streamed from the necklace, driving him back. He raised his hand and felt pulses from the piece. The sexual potency of a virile twenty-year-old man imbued the HeartGift; a man who had spent three days in an erotic delirium of a Passage that finally freed his psi power. T'Ash had focused all his creative, carnal energy on fashioning the necklace. Seventeen years had passed, and it still radiated.

Sexual tension washed through him and lodged, tingling his nerves, warming his muscles, pooling in his groin. He'd feel the pressure until he took his mate. The tautness was disconcerting, pleasure bordering on pain. Anticipation.

T'Ash sucked in a breath and looked at the necklace again. Now he saw only how it was fashioned. He frowned. The strands of silver, gold, and redgold wire weren't uniformly thin, but showed lumpy nodules in places. The gem mountings were often clumsy.

One side of his mouth quirked. When his hands hadn't wavered from sexual arousal, they'd shaken from exhaustion. He didn't remember eating or sleeping during the days he created the necklace—forging the metal, twisting the wire, setting the gems. The final jewel was a large roseamber pendant he'd spent sephours shaping. With the energy pouring through him, he wouldn't have been surprised if it had ended up in the shape of a phallus.

He'd made a heart.

Zanth, T'Ash's cat and Familiar, strolled in. *Fish again*, he projected telepathically to T'Ash. He carried his muscular fighter's body with grace. He'd attached himself to the child, Rand Ash, the first week in Downwind. The cat had announced he was Rand's Fam and demanded an Ash Family name. T'Ash's crate in the slum had been barely big enough for them both. Zanth had made the move into T'Ash Residence as if it were his due, though he looked every inch the Downwind tough. The cat was huge, two-thirds of a meter. Irregular black blotches dominated his white fur.

A red tongue caught a stray bit of food from his whiskers. *You hear? Fish again! Oily. Me not like and don't want any more.*

Zanth's comment grounded T'Ash. "I'll speak to the chef."

Zanth went to the workbench and stared up at the necklace. *That thing. From long ago.* His pink nose wrinkled. He opened his muzzle and curled his tongue to use his sixth sense—a combination of smell-taste. *Don't like it. It's feral you. Too much you and not enough Me. Take it away.*

"I'll take it with me to the shop tonight. I'm running the store. Majo, my manager, is on vacation for Discovery Day." *Col-on-ists in spaceships found Celta on Dis-cov-ery Day.*

"That's right."

Ships were down to few Cats. Good to party. You go on vac-a-tion, too.

"Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow." When he had his HeartMate. He could arrange a wedding on Discovery Day, then a long honeymoon. He grinned.

The gleam of a gem caught his eye and he looked again at the necklace and *saw* it, beyond its inherent power and the skill that fashioned it. He saw the style and the color of the gems. In that moment he knew who the woman was. His mate.

He had never seen her, but he knew of her. Majo had told him how often she visited the store. *Today you will meet your HeartMate.* Not today, but tonight. For the first time in several years he had to man his exclusive shop in CityCenter.

In the last few months he'd been playing a subtle game from a distance with an unseen customer, teasing her with his creations. She'd buy the charming and the whimsical, and preferred roseamber and redgold. All the jewelry she'd purchased had been at the least expensive end of his line. The pieces had also been some of his most original—and sensual.

He wished he knew her name.

From his pocket he pulled a long silver chain set with oddly shaped beads, and slid it through his fingers. It was designed to suspend a personal amulet. Some of the beads were round, some stone nuggets, and some faceted crystal. A simple piece with a small price, yet it was significantly superior in craftsmanship to the HeartGift.

Zanth hopped up on the worktable and swatted the chain.

T'Ash obligingly swung it. "The necklace is my gift to a mate, radiating my essence, and will draw her to me. We will have a woman living with us tomorrow. What do you say to that?"

Zanth looked past the swinging chain and narrowed his jade-green eyes at the necklace. *Mate prefer mouse.* He turned his back on the HeartGift. Snagging a claw in the chain, he brought it to his mouth. *This female. You play with her. Give toys.*

"Yes, I make her jewelry." T'Ash dropped the end of the chain. It rattled to the desk.

Zanth tangled his paws in the chain and glanced sideways at T'Ash. *This bauble was for her. She not take it.*

T'Ash shrugged. That he couldn't predict her taste intrigued him. Several pieces that he'd made especially to tempt her had been bought by others, or remained unsold—so Majo said.

T'Ash had not asked her name. Instead it had been an increasingly enchanting game.

A game once, but not now. She'd visit the shop tonight. He knew it by his sharpened senses and the deep expectation humming in his bones.

Zanth snuffled. He'd picked up a sinus infection prowling the alleys of Downwind that T'Ash had been unable to treat. Zanth was not amenable to nosedrops in each nostril three times a day. *Female.* He looked at the necklace. *Female's scent improve it.*

T'Ash winced at his cat's blunt remark.

Females are soft laps. Will accept one in My domain. Pro-vis-ion-al-ly. With that, Zanth gathered some of the beaded chain in his mouth and hopped from the table. The chain skittered on the floor as he turned and exited, tail high.

T'Ash didn't care to dwell on the thought of soft laps. He glanced at the HeartGift one more time and left it on his workbench. He needed more caff.

The power from the necklace swirled around him. He felt it, and so would she, the passion that heralded a life long love, the deep yearning for one special person. The necklace would attract and affect only her. The vital sexuality as well as his basic nature portrayed in his HeartGift would snare her, and he would take her home. Simple. Easy.

He had built a new Residence, a luxurious palace, after his final act of vengeance. Now he would have someone to share the echoing rooms with—a woman, a wife, a HeartMate.

A fierce smile curved his mouth. Having a mate would be satisfying, as satisfying as the orderly life he'd so carefully crafted after long struggle.

Today you will meet your HeartMate.

With a sweep of his hand, he gathered the dice on his desk. Two bounced and fell to the floor, one cracking. He bent and his fingers stilled. *Blaser rays surround a vulnerable woman.* He picked up the die showing the woman.

It fell to pieces.

A woman in danger.

His heart pounded like a hammer on an anvil. His Divination set, ruined. His lady, threatened. He'd put the violence—and the man he'd become seeking vengeance—behind him, but now his lady was endangered.

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Danith Mallow sidled to a corner of the elegant shop T'Ash's Phoenix. Here a table draped in beige damask held a lovely china caff set. After selecting a mug, she picked up the t'pot, keeping an eye on the man behind the U-shaped counter. She was accustomed to the friendly Majo, the slight salesman who usually staffed the store.

This man—it wasn't just that he wore black, both shirt and trousers, or that he had long midnight hair. Or that he was so big.

He stared at her.

His sky-crystal blue eyes looked shockingly light under his heavy brows and against his olive skin. Eyes as potent as blaster rays. His very presence was a dark, intense force in the bright, jewel-glittering shop.

Her smile faded. The man was too dark. Too solid. Too brooding. And she was alone with him.

Her eyes widened as she saw his sleeve cuffs—ash brown with embroidered green ash tree leaves. T'Ash himself!

She set down the hot t'pot before a stream of golden liquid wavered from her half-full mug.

She liked his designs. She could even afford the simple ones, but she'd never expected the mage-crafter to be so intimidating. Who'd expect a jeweler to look like an outlaw?

Glancing up from mixing her tea and sweet, she saw he still stared at her. He dipped his head, then turned to look pointedly at a necklace displayed on a black velvet easel sitting on the long part of the counter opposite the door. When his scrutiny returned to her, she shivered at the power, then lifted her chin.

Again his gaze touched the necklace and moved back to her. "Perhaps you would be interested in the necklace." His voice sounded as dark as the rest of him, with a rasp that should have roused fear, but somehow seemed to stroke her skin.

"No, thank you." She held her warm mug of tea, both as a prop and a comforting drink.

He scowled. A spark of anger flared in his eyes. Who'd expect the man to be so sensitive about his work?

His eyes narrowed. He angled the display stand from facing the door, directly toward her. With one large finger he delicately traced the stones of the necklace, touched the roseamber heart. A tingle ran up her spine.

"You'd like the necklace." The undertone in his voice was darker still, tempting, almost decadent.

"No," she lied. She'd seen the piece the moment she entered. Well, *seen* wasn't quite the right word. *Felt*, *been drawn to*, or even *enchanted by*, were more apt. As with all of his jewelry, something about it satisfied her on several levels. But she knew at a glance that the value of the stones alone put it far beyond her modest budget. Why, the roseamber heart itself was a good four centimeters. She blinked and leaned forward for a better view. In the center of the gem glowed a golden flaw in a shape she couldn't quite make out.

"Come look."

"No, thank you." Danith couldn't afford the thing, and if she saw it close enough to really desire it, she sensed it would haunt her when she left. There were many things beyond her grasp in life, and this was simply one more. Besides, the necklace was only a few handspans from the man.

"Come. Look." He didn't coax now. He demanded.

"No."

T'Ash made her uncomfortable, his aura and his rank. Sooner or later she might succumb to the pull of the necklace, or curiosity, or his intent stare, and find herself trying on the piece. She didn't need one more unattainable thing in her life, one more lost dream.

She slid her gaze to T'Ash. He continued to stare at her. She made a show of glancing at her timer, set her tea down, and sent him a false smile. "Sorry, I must go." She headed for the door. A hum sounded. She pulled on the knob and nothing happened.

Whirling around, she glared at him. Her heart thumped with a mixture of wariness and anger. She chose to show the anger. "You locked the door. Open it, now."

He smiled. The flash of his white teeth didn't lighten his face. "Promise to look at the necklace."

"You GreatLords think you can flout the rules of conduct—"

A dark cloud seemed to coalesce around him. The atmosphere in the shop dimmed and grew thick. For the first time, Danith felt alarmed. She groped for the red fire-pull behind her.

"Don't." He made the word soft and persuasive. "Please, GentleLady—"

"Miz," she snapped. "Simply, miz."

"Stay. Look at the necklace."

"Open the door."

With each moment the silence between them changed from strained to something quite different. The intensity of his blue-silver gaze mesmerized her. His evident power, not only magical but his essential male vitality, enveloped her.

And it wasn't menacing, but sheltering. It quieted her breathing, calmed her fears, and impressed an elemental fact upon her. *He would never harm her.* Even so, she didn't feel quite safe.

A short hum buzzed loud in the silence. She touched the doorknob behind her. It turned under her fingers.

The light in the shop was suddenly too bright. She closed her eyelids, shutting away the gleaming brilliance of the jewels and shining metals, none of which were as dazzling as his light blue eyes.

A soft, whispery noise made her open her lashes. T'Ash pushed the velvet stand down to the short leg of the counter, across from the caff set, then he retreated to the middle of the glass case opposite the door and her. He stepped back until he was against the far wall and put his hands behind him. No doubt it was supposed to be a reassuring gesture, but the black shirt outlined his impressive biceps and chest.

"Look at the necklace. Try it on."

She glanced at it, finding its charm even more heady than before—just the sight of a glimmering sapphire pulled at her. And the golden amber flaw in the heart tantalized. She jerked her gaze away only to meet his considering expression. Irritation welled up in her. She compressed her lips.

"Try the necklace on," he urged quietly.

"I. Can't. Afford. The necklace." Not in money and not in peace of mind.

Now *he* blinked. His heavy, dark brows arched slightly, and he smiled. "Yes, you can. Easily." The lilt of his words caressed her.

Danith stared at him with suspicion.

He set his hands on his lean hips. "I am T'Ash. I, no other, set the price on my work. And the necklace"—his lips curved again as he nodded to it—"is one of my earlier efforts. You will find that it doesn't have the quality of the other pieces you've given a home."

Her eyes narrowed further. She was about to reply when the bells hanging on the door behind her jangled. She moved from the doorway, instinctively going to the comfort of the tea—but also toward the necklace.

Four laughing women entered, and Danith instantly felt scruffy, unsophisticated, and exactly what she was. Common. They were all nobles: one GreatLady, then two GrandLadies

and a lesser GraceLady. They wore long gowns with colorful embroidered patterns in shining metallic thread, or long ankle-length tunics cut up the sides to the hip to show billowing silken trousers of a contrasting colors. Their hair was arranged in intricate designs.

Danith glanced down at her plain blue knee-length tunic over her narrow-legged trousers. She placed a hand on her hair, which had escaped its simple tie, and sighed. Definitely common.

"T'Ash!" the GreatLady exclaimed, holding her hands out over the counter in greeting. "It's so rare we see you. Not since the FirstFamilies Council last."

FirstFamilies Councils and GreatHouses had nothing to do with Danith. She had never envied nobles or aspired to their status. The titles carried too much formality and responsibility. Still, it wasn't often she could see them up close. She reached for her tea mug, studiously avoiding the necklace. Yet, in directing her gaze from the jewelry, her glance focused again on the man. She watched T'Ash from under her lashes as she sipped her delicious but now tepid drink.

"D'Birch." T'Ash grazed one of the GreatLady's hands with fingertips, then reverted to brooding. He'd never make a salesman.

"You have such Flair, such lovely things," D'Birch gushed.

The other women agreed and spread throughout the shop, gravitating to the cases where the most expensive jewelry was.

"Excuse me, I'm quite parched." One of the GrandLadies smiled at Danith and reached for the cocoa carafe. Danith looked at the embroidery on the Lady's sleeve—a spindle, signifying her name.

"GrandLady D'Spindle," Danith acknowledged the older woman.

D'Spindle poured a mug of cocoa and offered the carafe.

Danith smiled and shook her head. "No, thank you anyway." She stepped back until she bumped against the glass case. When she turned, the sight of the necklace dazed her. Something huge wrenched inside her. Her mug clattered to the counter as she pressed a hand to her breastbone.

"Are you all right?" D'Spindle left her cup and hurried over.

Danith gasped. Her gaze locked on the necklace. Wave after wave of hot sensation captured her pulse. Heat rose to her cheeks. "The necklace," she panted.

"The necklace?" D'Spindle patted Danith on the shoulder and looked around distractedly.

Without thought Danith reached for the incredible piece of jewelry but managed to fist her hand before actually touching it. "The necklace."

"Hmmm?" D'Spindle peered beyond Danith's fist. "Yes, there does seem to be something there, but it's of no matter, my dear. What can I do to help you?"

"A cold drink." Heat and more uncoiled from her very core. Desire stirred, a deep sexual yearning she'd never experienced. And she knew exactly the man responsible. She dragged her gaze from the necklace and shot a look of pure fury at him.

T'Ash nodded and smiled smugly. "The necklace."

Anger boiled in Danith. A seduction spell. He'd put a filthy seduction spell on the jewels and no doubt considered a common woman like her fair game to test it on, to see if she would come trembling with lust to his bed. She felt cheapened and oddly betrayed.

The commotion drew the others to Danith's end of the room.

"Yes," D'Birch said, "it is a necklace. I think." She peered at the radiant thing. "Though I must say the spellshield on this piece is faulty. I can barely see it." She sniffed. "There is a nice bit of roseamber, about thirty thou?"

Taking a cold tumbler from D'Spindle, Danith gulped ice water with a tang of mint. She'd known she could never afford the necklace. Now she knew the price would have been too costly in more ways than one. Nausea rose at the idea of playing the sextoy for some jaded noble.

"It can't be just thirty thou gilt." The little, beak-nosed GraceLady squinted at the necklace. "It has a rare flaw of golden, looks like a fish. Sixty minimum. Just for that stone."

Danith finished her water and clinked the tumbler next to her mug on the glass counter. Everyone's words sounded crazy. No one acted rationally. She had to get out. She smiled at D'Spindle. "Thank you, but I need some fresh air."

Danith strode to the door but jumped aside as a man hustled in. Slightly younger than T'Ash, exquisite embroidery graced his cuffs—from it she identified the man as Holm, the Heir of the Hollys, another GreatHouse. My, she was mixing with exalted company this eve. The whole night's events made her mind spin.

"T'Ash, I need you. My brother's life's at stake! A weapon and a calming spell—" Holm demanded.

Danith caught the door before it swung shut and slipped out. Through the glass panel she saw T'Ash vault over his counter and head for her.

"Stop!" he shouted.

She ignored him, and before he could take a step farther, Holm Holly grabbed fistfuls of T'Ash's shirt. "You owe me from the time I helped you find and bring your Family's killers to justice—your vengeance stalk. I'm claiming my boon."

Danith couldn't resist one final glance into the shop. An aura of power surrounded the bright stones of the necklace, placed at an angle where she couldn't really see it. How disappointing. Though she shouldn't want another glance at it, she did.

She also felt compelled to look at T'Ash. He inclined his head to her, and his fiery blue gaze seemed to issue a promise. A promise cloaked in danger.

She broke eye contact. He was too disturbing, too big, and too powerful—both in Flair and in rank. She looked at her timer again and sighed.

The evening was slipping away and she still had a namegift and four Discovery Day tokens to buy. The namegift was for Claif, her current gallant. Not an intimate present, but one of serious intent—she was almost in love with Claif, he was exuberant and masculine and uncomplicated. She *did* love his large, cheerful, and welcoming family. Something special for Claif, perhaps a generation alemug with a touch of magic... Planning her future, a comfortable middle-class future, she turned and walked away.

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T'Ash watched his HeartMate stroll up the street. Frustration burned inside him. He'd followed her with his gaze every instant she'd been in the shop, and now she was gone. He had never known how to treat a woman, and had obviously been too impatient, pushed her too hard.

She hadn't touched the HeartGift, let alone him. She hadn't accepted the necklace willingly and without knowing it was a HeartGift, which was necessary by law for him to claim her. She wasn't going home with him tonight, something he had expected and anticipated.

He glared at Holm Holly, who'd ignored T'Ash's obvious outrage and continued to make demands. T'Ash didn't want to risk ruining the shop by fighting with Holly.

T'Ash craned to see out the window, up the street. Before he could move, she'd hopped onto a public carrier that trundled along the twisting street of luxurious shops.

"I'm speaking to you," Holm said.

T'Ash dragged his attention back. He owed Holm a debt of blood and honor, and Holm was claiming it. Now, at the least convenient time. Naturally.

T'Ash set his teeth. Small problems. Minor things he could and would handle. They would not be allowed to wrinkle the smooth fabric of his days or ignite the wildness that lived in his center.

Removing his shirt from Holm's grip, he went behind the counter, putting distance between them and forcing his anger into the grounding mat beneath his feet. "I hear you, Holm."

"Listen!" Holm raked a hand through his silver-blond hair. It fell back smoothly, not a hair out of place. "I need a weapon for my brother, something longer than a dagger and shorter than a sword—a main gauche, and with a very powerful but subtle calming spell."

T'Ash's mouth twisted. Holm wanted impossibilities. "When?"

"As soon as possible." He fisted the elegant fingers T'Ash envied, pounding hard enough on the case to shiver the glass.

"You know how long it takes to forge a quality spellblade," T'Ash said.

Holm met his stare with a dark gray one. He put both palms on the counter and leaned forward. "We followed your vengeance trail day and night until it was...done."

T'Ash jerked his head in a nod.

"It looks as if my brother's Passage will coincide with Discovery Day. Passages for a Holly always involve death duels. Remember my own when I found myself in Downwind and you saved me? I want a spell to help Tinne keep his head, dampen his emotions and impulses. I want the best magic for him. Only you can make an object strong enough to handle such a potent spell and splendid enough that he would wear it all the time with his blaser gun."

A small warmth suffused T'Ash at the words praising his skill, but it wasn't enough to quell his simmering frustration.

"I need the blade and I need it in just a few days."

"That will take most of my time, strength, energy, and Flair." T'Ash smiled grimly. He wanted to pursue his HeartMate, not forge a main gauche.

Holm's expression hardened. "With Passage, the bloodlust will come. Imbue the weapon with calm, disciplined emotions. I can trust you for that, too." His restless fingers drummed on the glass.

"You have called in your debt of blood and honor."

"My brother, Tinne, is very impetuous."

"Like all the Hollys."

A humorless smile flashed across Holm's face. "My brother is even more rash than I was."

"Than you are."

Holm lifted a brow. "*Was*. However, Tinne, being the second son, believes he has more to prove to the world than I. He seeks duels to demonstrate his honor and manhood. And since I gravitated to Downwind during my Passage, no doubt he, too--"

"A bellicose, arrogant Holly with something to prove. I shudder."

Holm snorted. "I wouldn't want him to meet you in a Downwind alley."

T'Ash's face froze. He'd spent too many years, had too many experiences in the slum for it to be an amusing matter, even now.

Holm's eyes widened, but he slid over the moment with the ease of a gregarious talker. "I have some ideas. I want the main gauche to be a gift, but don't want Tinne to realize that it's more than it seems. I have an ancient heirloom." He drew out a black hilt and half a blade.

A shaft of pure pain speared T'Ash, but he kept his face impassive. His Family, his Residence, all his line's treasures and possessions, all his own small belongings, had been destroyed in the huge voracious fire—except the ring he'd worn and the book he'd carried.

He remembered weapons owned and used by his forebears, books to fill two libraries, furniture and paintings commissioned and carved for his Family over generations. All gone.

Holm tapped an elegant finger on the fancy engraved scrollwork on the knife's hilt. "Tinne has always been particularly fond of this dagger, because of the pattern."

From under lowered brows, T'Ash studied the piece. The weapon dated from two centuries before. Beauty combined with function and melded with sculpted grace to make the dagger a work of art.

He glanced around the shop, noticing that D'Birch and the other noble ladies had departed in the meantime, probably to spread gossip about Holly business. Someone had tidied up the

counter and caff table. T'Ash put the dagger down and left Holm to serve some waiting customers who were either enjoying the conversation between Holm and himself or were too awed by the GreatLords to interrupt.

Even with the hustle and bustle of the shop, no one gave the necklace more than a passing glance. Nor did Holm. But a HeartGift was only easily visible to himself and his HeartMate if he was not concentrating on it.

After taking care of the shoppers, T'Ash returned his attention to the ancient blade. Reverently he lifted it to scrutinize the smithing. He felt the tingle of old power in the hilt, indicating a once formidable spell. This dagger was not as strong as the weapon T'Ash could craft, but Flair had grown more powerful in two centuries. Now it was far beyond the puny psi-gifts of the original colonists, even the twenty-five FirstFamilies who had commissioned the starships so they could find a new home and develop their Flair. They'd left Earth and journeyed to Celta to be able to live without fear of persecution.

The feel of the hilt, the echo of Flair sparked inspiration. T'Ash pulled a sketchbook from behind the counter. With a few quick lines he drew an elegant main gauche with a pattern reminiscent, but more modern, than the one on the old dagger.

"Yes. Exactly!" Holm pinched at the drawing as if he could feel the thing. His smile deepened until a crease showed in his cheek. T'Ash remembered that look, usually saved for the exuberance of a fight. "In fact, I'll commission three. One for myself and my father, also."

T'Ash frowned and took the papyrus from his friend. "Your brother's main gauche first, as soon as I can manage. Have Tinne come tomorrow night to test the preliminary balance of the blade. Your nameday is three twinmoon phases from now, your long dagger will be finished then. Your father's will be ready by the anniversary of Holly GreatHouse."

Holm's fingers made another tinkling tattoo on the glass counter. "No sooner for the others?"

T'Ash straightened and matched Holm's height. He leaned forward, emphasizing his Ash bulk. "I have other priorities now. You called in your blood debt and I will honor it. The rest must wait."

Both of Holm's winged silver-blond eyebrows rose, and a wicked smile graced his lips. "Personal business." He rubbed his hands, touched the handle of his short-barreled blaser at his side. "Fighting?"

"No."

Holm sighed and looked at the sketch again. "Pity. You have grown positively staid of late."

"My vengeance is over. It had to be pursued but now is done. I can concentrate on rebuilding my line and shaping my life."

A hint of envy flickered in Holm's eyes. "You have no Family to pressure you, no bonds of obligation to anyone else. You can live life as you please."

"No Family. No ancestral home." T'Ash tapped the dagger. "No generational possessions. Only myself and my hopes alone. Only a Residence that echoes with newness. Only possessions I have purchased or made."

Holm inclined his head. "I understand. And despite all those lacks, you still have the duties, responsibilities, and rituals that all FirstFamilies and GreatHouses must observe."

"Indeed." T'Ash didn't want to think of the void still in his life, particularly since his HeartMate had rejected him. With a drawtool he began detailing a complex bit of the hilt on his design. The commission would keep his mind off his problems, at least until the shop closed. "You know, this main gauche far exceeds a Discovery Day trinket."

Holm waved a hand. "Leave the explaining to me."

T'Ash looked up and met his friend's eyes. "As I did when I heeded your advice to quit spilling blood and deliver the last of my enemies to the FirstFamilies Council? As I did when I let you 'explain' our—my—duels of vengeance to the Council?"

"The Holly ability to 'explain' is only excelled by our ability to fight." Holm winked.

T'Ash smiled. The Hollys deeply believed that motto of theirs. He gripped Holm's shoulder. "I don't know if I ever thanked you for those little speeches, but know that I am grateful. Beyond the debt of blood and honor."

Holm hunched his shoulder, then glanced out the window. "I'll leave you to your craft, then. Pretty ladies are strolling the avenues this eve."

T'Ash withdrew his hand and followed Holm's gaze out the window to a well-rounded blond. A pang of yearning spurred him. His own small HeartMate of the chestnut hair and hazel eyes had escaped the range of his senses some moments before.

T'Ash turned to the line of customers and boxed up small charms in the shape of starships before he once again spoke to Holm. "I can keep the dagger to study?"

"Yes, yes." Holm replied absently, flirting with the lady outside.

T'Ash watched unspoken messages pass from Holm to the woman and wished for his friend's suavity. "You should invite her in and purchase a bauble for her."

That broke the spell. Holm laughed. "My friend, you do excellent work and are well rewarded for it. A creation from T'Ash's Phoenix should not be wasted on a mere passing fancy."

"Thank you. You'd best hurry, I think she's moving on."

Holm adjusted his embroidered cuffs. "I'll see you soon."

"Remember, have Tinne come in so I can fit the main gauche to his hand and charge the blade to his energy."

"Yes, of course," Holm said with a nod. "Merry meet."

"And merry part," T'Ash gave the traditional reply.

"And merry meet again," Holm said and strolled out the door.

T'Ash nodded, then his gaze fixed on the antique dagger once more. The spiral engraved on the pommel...

He spent the rest of the evening in the first flush of inspiration and grudgingly handled sales. The shop was far busier than he recalled. Perhaps he should give Majo a higher percentage. That thought was the last T'Ash had of the store until he noticed the shop was vacant. So was the street outside, lit by nightpoles and the weak light of two waning twinmoons.

Sighing, he opened his cramped hand, stretched it, and rubbed his fingers. Before him lay three pages of drawings, one for each main gauche. T'Ash felt satisfied that the weapons would be exceptional and capable of holding mighty spells.

He shuffled the papyrus drawings together, then started to close the shop. His memory flashed on the beginning of the night. His HeartMate had left him. His previous disappointment crashed down on him like a physical blow.

He swung the black velvet display around. His heart lurched. The necklace was gone!