

Stolen Hearts

Book
One

Sasha
L. Miller

Less Than
Three Press



Stolen Hearts
By Sasha L. Miller

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Sasha C. Miller

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Part One

Mervyn was in his work room, putting the finishing touches on a three-way communication charm, when Evandie descended the basement stairs with loud, stomping steps. She bustled into the room, pausing just inside the "safe zone" around the doorway, and gave the cluttered work room a pinched, disapproving look.

"You have a customer," she announced, voice stiff and as disapproving as her look. So perhaps it was the customer earning her disapproval and not the state of his work room. "I've put him in the salon. I suggest you hurry before he steals something."

Definitely the customer then.

"Yes, Evandie, I'll be right there. Bring us a tray of refreshments, please. Tea and some of those cakes," Mervyn said, waving dismissively at her. He turned back to his charm without waiting to see if she went. Evandie might be a stick in the mud, but she was good about doing what he asked and getting her work done.

Mervyn finished the charm slowly, not willing to rush it and risk screwing up the entire morning's work to see what had Evandie in such a snit. All told, it was another half an hour before he was tucking the charms away into their black velvet boxes, labeling them neatly and putting them aside for delivery later.

Then he brushed his dusty hands off on his pants and headed for the door. His work rooms were all in the basement, and each work room had a different purpose. Mervyn mostly did health-magic work, but he also played around with communication charms and a handful of other different types of magic. Shutting the work room's door behind him, Mervyn absently activated the lock charm on the door before heading up the stairs.

He wasn't entirely presentable, but then he rarely had customers who took offense to that sort of thing, so he wasn't too worried about it. If this customer was stuffy, he'd just refer them to a different charm master.

The receiving salon was at the front of the house, bathed in early afternoon sunlight by the huge windows that faced the street. Mervyn let himself in quietly, taking in his latest customer and immediately seeing why Evandie disapproved.

The young man was pale, with dark shadows beneath pale eyes. He was dressed in a number of layers, but it seemed to be to combat a chill rather than because he had to wear everything he owned. His fingers twitched and fidgeted, apparently unable to hold still, and he was probably after a health charm.

"Hello, I'm Mervyn," Mervyn greeted, keeping his voice soft and cheerful as he spoke. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting so long."

"It's okay," the young man said softly, his voice deeper than Mervyn had expected. "Um, my name's Callisto."

"What can I do for you, Callisto?" Mervyn asked, pouring tea for them both before sitting down. Callisto didn't move to take the second cup, so perhaps the jitters in his hands were part of his illness and not nerves?

"I need ... can you modify charms?" Callisto asked, obviously nervous. And with good reason—it wasn't precisely illegal to modify another wizard's charms, but it was highly frowned upon unless the original wizard was dead. "It—it's not yours, I know, but there's nowhere else—" Callisto cut himself off, his lips thinning as he grimaced, his right shoulder jerking up and back for no reason that Mervyn could immediately tell.

Callisto took a deep breath, and Mervyn waited patiently, not willing to make any judgments until he had more details. Still, this was looking to be more complicated than a health charm.

"You—" Callisto glanced towards the front windows, where the curtains were pulled back to show the garden in the front of the house. He dropped his voice, saying quietly, "You have fairy lights."

"I do," Mervyn said, a little surprised. Despite the fairy lights, he rarely got any fairies who admitted what they were. Only fairies could see fairy lights; Mervyn had them in front of his house because he'd helped a fairy with a complicated piece of magic a few years ago, and had had—but ignored—the opportunity to bind him.

"You were charmed by another wizard? Not a binding?" Mervyn asked, wondering why a wizard would do that. Charms were as difficult to lay as bindings, but not as restricting. They also couldn't do the one thing a binding could—give the wizard access to the fairy's magical energy.

"Yes," Callisto said, looking even more upset by that.

"May I see it?" Mervyn asked, since that would be easier than asking Callisto to try to explain all the intricacies of the charm to him. It really was strange—why charm, but not bind? Unless the wizard hadn't known that Callisto was a fairy, which was a possibility since there was no easy way to distinguish a fairy from a wizard, unless one cast a spell.

Callisto nodded, his fingers fumbling at the buttons of the jacket he wore. It took him several minutes to remove all of the layers he was wearing with the way his fingers were shaking, but Mervyn didn't offer to help, sure that would only make Callisto more tense.

It was a fine chest, when it was finally revealed, but Mervyn was completely distracted from that thought by the square metal panel affixed directly above Callisto's heart. It was smooth and unmarked, and the skin around it was red and inflamed, meaning it had only recently been put in place.

Mervyn frowned, patting his pockets until he found his spectacles. Putting aside his half-finished tea, he put on his spectacles and stood.

"May I?" Mervyn asked, gesturing to the charm. Callisto gave him a short, jerky nod, and Mervyn stepped forward, completely focused on the panel. The spell had to be on the inside of the panel, since it didn't show on this side. It also had to be affixed magically, since there was nothing obvious holding it in place, but what was the purpose of it? He'd have to do a transpose spell in order to see the other side of the panel and the spell marks.

"I need to do a transpose spell," Mervyn said, glancing up and meeting Callisto's eyes. They were closer than Mervyn had realized, but he tried not to let it ruffle his composure. He'd been close to customers before, without getting flustered. This was no different.

"What does that do?" Callisto asked, one hand straying towards the metal plate slightly before dropping back to the armrest of the chair. "It won't turn it off, will it?"

"No, it doesn't change anything," Mervyn reassured, curious all over again. Callisto wanted it modified, he'd said, not completely removed. "It simply gives me a representation of the other side, so I can see the spell marks for the charm. It doesn't touch or interfere with the spell at all."

"Okay," Callisto said, and Mervyn would be willing to bet Callisto didn't know much of wizard magic. A transpose spell was simple and oft-used by wizards. But then, Callisto was a fairy, so he had a fairly good reason to avoid wizards.

"Hold on a moment," Mervyn said, crossing the room to the little writing desk in the corner. Evandie was always complaining about it and how it didn't belong, but Mervyn liked the accessibility of it; it was much better than having to run downstairs for a notebook.

Unlocking the center drawer, Mervyn pulled out a thick notebook and then shut and relocked the drawer. One of his more clever charms was spelled into this notebook: anything he wrote here was copied into a duplicate notebook he kept in his main work room.

"Who was the wizard who did this?" Mervyn asked, despite knowing it was probably a sore spot. After all, if Callisto trusted the wizard who'd done the charm in the first place, he'd be getting it modified by him. Still, knowing who the wizard was could prove useful in modifying the spell, if Mervyn was familiar with his work.

"I don't know," Callisto said, looking even more wretched. His shoulder twitched back and up again, and Callisto shook his head, as though denying something. "I never saw him."

"Okay, that's okay," Mervyn said, more convinced than ever something strange and probably illegal was going on here. Perhaps he could get a read on the wizard based on the spell, though Mervyn had never been that good at picking out a wizard's signature based on spell marks. "The transpose spell won't hurt. You shouldn't feel anything when I cast it. What it will do is give me an image of what's on the other side of the panel, so I can see the spell work and see what it does and if I can modify it."

"Okay," Callisto said, not looking very reassured. Mervyn didn't really blame him, not after an encounter with an unknown wizard had left him with a strange charm that was possibly causing the physical symptoms Mervyn was seeing. He'd have to get the whole story out of Callisto later, if he could.

"Here goes," Mervyn said, trying to give Callisto as much warning as he could. Murmuring the words to the transpose spell softly, he frowned at the silvery, flickering image as it coalesced in the air in front of Callisto's chest. It wasn't just a metal plate, as Mervyn had originally surmised, but a small, metal contraption the size of his two fists pressed together. It fit neatly, obviously, which meant—

"He took your heart?" Mervyn blurted out, dropping his notebook and losing his hold on the transpose spell at the same time. The image flickered and then disappeared, even as Callisto flinched.

"I don't know why," Callisto said, biting his lip briefly. "It—this—" Callisto touched the edge of the metal contraption. "It lets him take my energy, and I can't—if I take it out, I have no heart and I die."

"Which is why you need it modified," Mervyn said faintly, stooping to retrieve his notebook. "God, why would—" Except that was a stupid question. Fairy energy did wonders for wizard spells; it was twice as effective as regular wizard energy, but a wizard could only get it if a fairy was bound to him. Add to that, a wizard could only be bound to a single fairy at a time... and a charm, that wasn't the same as a binding at all. A charm like this could be used on as many fairies as a wizard wanted, with none of the restrictions of a binding.

"We'll fix this," Mervyn said, furious and worried at the same time. It was bad enough many wizards simply forced the binding of a fairy; this was a thousand times worse. If he ever got his hands on the wizard who'd done this, well, he had a few dozen particularly nasty curse charms hidden away that could be put to good use.

"I hope so," Callisto said, not looking at all confident. Probably because he was *missing his heart*.

"The first step will be the hardest," Mervyn mused, pulling one of the nearby chairs closer to where Callisto was still sitting. "We have to keep that—" Mervyn gestured to the heart charm, "—alive, while taking away the wizard's ability to pull energy from you. To be safe, we should probably completely replace the charm ..."

Mervyn jotted down a few notes, frowning thoughtfully. He'd never done a replacement heart charm, though a few of the more practiced surgeon-wizards at the hospital had. He was sure to have at least one reference book to help.

"The wizard who did this may have your actual heart alive. If we can find him—"

"Why would he keep it alive?" Callisto interrupted, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Since I have this?"

"If I read the spell correctly," Mervyn said, and he'd only gotten a brief look so it was possible he was mistaken, "the wizard needs a ... piece of you, to be able to draw energy from you. It could be he took a lock of hair or something, but why bother when he already took your heart? Also, he probably thinks it's a good bit of insurance for him. Even if I fix this, you'd go searching for him, yes?"

"I hadn't thought past this," Callisto said, sinking in his chair a little, and Mervyn actually believed that. In Callisto's place, he'd be furious, but Callisto was obviously more upset than angry. "Will you be able to fix it?"

"Definitely. Even if I have to copy what he did, you'll be free of the drain. Though I think I can do it more simply, without any of the energy hooks," Mervyn added hastily, when he saw a bit of suspicion flash across Callisto's face. "Since the majority of the spell work he did is to pull energy from you, and my only goal is to simulate your heart."

"Okay," Callisto said, looking weary and completely worn out. Obviously the heart part of the charm was working much less efficiently than Callisto's original heart had. Not surprising, since the only goal for the wizard would be to get as much energy from Callisto as he could without killing him.

"Unfortunately, working out the charm will take a few days," Mervyn said, leaning back in his seat thoughtfully. He'd also have to get Denzil's help—there was no way he could perform the operation to replace the heart charm on his own. "I don't want to rush it and screw something simple up, and I need to consult with someone familiar with fairy anatomy to make sure I'm not overlooking something with your physiology. You can meet him, too. He's the fairy who gave them the lights out front."

"Okay," Callisto said again, not sounding too thrilled about that, but Mervyn did want to give him that reassurance, at least.

"Is it all right if I cast the transpose spell again?" Mervyn asked, shifting to the edge of his seat. "I didn't get as close a look as I'd liked before I fumbled it."

"Sure," Callisto said then winced, his face turning an alarming gray color. "Sorry, wait—" Callisto stammered, one trembling hand pressing against the heart charm in his chest.

Mervyn winced, wondering what—but it was probably the wizard draining some of Callisto's energy. If he was cruel enough to carve the heart from a fairy's chest, there was no reason he'd try to ease any pain the transfer caused.

Unsure what to do—relatively sure any words of comfort wouldn't be comforting—Mervyn sketched out a brief image of what the heart charm had looked like, making small notes on his thoughts for what each curve, ridge, and edge was for.

"Okay, it should be good," Callisto said, his voice a little shaky. Mervyn nodded, frowning a little as he scrutinized Callisto. Callisto looked even worse than before, and Mervyn hoped the wizard pulling from him wasn't stupid enough to drain Callisto completely.

"Just hold still," Mervyn said, as soothingly as he could. He didn't wait for a reply, just started the transpose spell again. It still took him aback, seeing the heart charm, but Mervyn didn't let it distract him, focusing instead on fleshing out his sketch and drawing out the spell marks. It was a complicated charm, as Mervyn had expected, and he really didn't want to think about how the wizard had come up with and refined the spell work functioning in place of Callisto's heart.

"I can work with this," Mervyn muttered as he let the transpose spell dissipate. He made a few more notes before flipping to a fresh page and pausing. "Can you tell me what you remember about the casting of it? Anything you can remember may help."

"I don't remember much," Callisto said quietly, pulling together the first of his layers. Mervyn made a note to dig up a warming charm for Callisto and another to ask about the other side-effects he was suffering as a result of the heart charm. Mervyn could probably alleviate most of them with various supplementary charms. "It was ... a few nights ago. I was looking for an inn or something to stay in ..." Callisto hesitated, but didn't go into more detail on that point. "I asked someone."

Mervyn nodded encouragingly, not pressing, but letting Callisto speak at his own pace.

"I went down an alley," Callisto said, his brow furrowing as he thought. "It was dark, and I remember—I thought the person I'd asked directions of was setting me up to be mugged."

Mervyn made a note of that—perhaps there was more than one person involved in this. Likely, actually, since it had to be difficult to replace a heart.

"I heard something behind me, and I turned to look," Callisto said, shaking his head. "Then nothing."

"Were you hit? Physically or magically?" Mervyn asked, though it sounded like the latter. It never hurt to be thorough, however.

"Magically, I think? There was no pain," Callisto said. "I don't remember any, though I don't think that means much. I don't remember a lot."

"Okay," Mervyn said, making another few notes. "And when you woke up?"

"I was still there, in the alley," Callisto said, and he clenched his hands into fists, temporarily stilling their trembling. "My chest hurt, but I didn't understand—not until the first time the wizard pulled my energy."

"Did he leave anything with you? Could you find the alley again?" Mervyn asked, though it was probably a moot point now. If the wizard had taken that much care to keep hidden, he'd be careful to not leave any clues that pointed to him.

"Nothing I found," Callisto said, frowning miserably. "I don't even know how he knew—how he found out that I'm a fairy."

"You're new to town," Mervyn said, his suspicions confirmed when Callisto nodded. He made another note about that—how *had* the wizard figured it out? "I take it you didn't cast anything."

"Not in town," Callisto said, shaking his head. "It's ... it's a few days travel from home to here, and I know no one saw me. I was at home; we have special areas that can't be seen."

"What spell did you cast?" Mervyn asked, noting that down. If the mystery wizard could both detect fairies without seeing them cast *and* draw energy from them without a binding ... Mervyn didn't even want to think of the consequences of such power.

"It was ... a tracking spell," Callisto said quietly. He frowned briefly, but finally added, obviously reluctant, "Tracking my brother. He's been in the city on business, but he was supposed to come home a few weeks ago."

"A tracking spell—did you embed it in something?" Mervyn asked. That would lend the spell the appearance of a wizard's charm and suggest Callisto was a wizard, not a fairy.

"Of course," Callisto said, sounding offended at Mervyn's insinuation. "I'm not that careless."

"I was just making sure," Mervyn said, noting that down. "Do you still have it? Or did you extinguish it?"

"It went out when I found him," Callisto said, and then he winced, half-raising a hand to his chest before clenching his fingers into a fist and dropping his hand back to his lap. "It was stupid, too. He's got a lover or something and was too wrapped up in that to write or even realize he was supposed to be home."

"Would you like me to find him?" Mervyn asked, though he was pretty sure he knew the answer to that. Non-consensual bindings were stupidly viewed as the bound fairy's fault, when usually they were snatch-and-bind jobs like this.

"No," Callisto said miserably, staring at his lap. "He was upset I was here in the first place; he'd just be angrier to know what happened."

"As you wish," Mervyn said. Perhaps he could get Denzil to help find the brother anyway. "What side effects does the heart charm have?"

"Side effects?" Callisto repeated, obviously thrown by the change in subject.

"The function is to draw energy from you and replace the beating of your heart. How else is it affecting you?" Mervyn asked, trying to not sound overly clinical but pretty sure he failed.

"Oh, um," Callisto stammered, his pale cheeks gaining the faintest hint of color. "I'm cold?"

"All over or just your extremities?" Mervyn asked, making yet more notes.

"All over," Callisto said, twisting his fingers together nervously. "It's worse in my fingers though? And my feet. I think that's why my fingers shake so much?"

"Could be," Mervyn said, adding 'shaky fingers' to the list. "Any weakness? Shortness of breath?"

"Both, but only if I try to move too much or do a lot," Callisto said, looking more miserable as Mervyn wrote that down. "It also hurts?"

"A lot or a little?" Mervyn asked, making a note to get a pain-blocking charm for Callisto as well as a warming charm.

"A lot," Callisto said hesitantly, as though admitting a great weakness.

"Anything else?" Mervyn asked, adding a few reminders to himself about what to look out for when building the replacement charm.

"No," Callisto said quietly, looking down at his hands.

"Good, good," Mervyn muttered, taking a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing. "Here's what I propose. It will take me a few days, minimum, to build the replacement charm, possibly longer if I can't reach my consultant. In the meantime, I will supply you with charms to ease the cold and pain you're experiencing. I can also offer you a room here until the replacement charm is in place, unless you prefer to stay somewhere else."

"I—" Callisto blinked a few times, startled. "What will it cost?"

"Nothing," Mervyn said firmly, setting down his pen and pulling off his spectacles. "At most, I'd ask you to help me track down the wizard responsible, but this never should have been done to you, and I'm not going to compound the matter by asking you to pay to fix it."

"But that's not fair to you, either," Callisto argued, frowning. "The charm—it's going to take a lot of work and time—"

"I like a challenge," Mervyn reassured him. "And I'll take it out of your attacker's hide when I find him, so really, don't worry about it. Shall I have Evandie prepare a room for you? It would be easier to have you here in case I have to make adjustments during the process."

"If you don't mind," Callisto said, and he likely didn't have anywhere else to go, but Mervyn wasn't going to press that point.

"I don't," Mervyn said firmly. "Do you have your things with you, or shall I send someone to have them fetched?"

"They're here. The woman who answered the door—Evandie?" Callisto asked, continuing when Mervyn nodded. "She took them to put somewhere while I waited."

"Easy enough, then," Mervyn said, pulling back his sleeve and pressing a button on his watch. Evandie had a matching one—it would alert her that he required her presence.

Sure enough, a moment later, Evandie knocked briskly on the door before entering. She didn't spare Callisto even a glance, just stared at Mervyn with a displeased look. Glancing at the clock on the mantel showed why—it was half-past three, time for Evandie's usual tea.

"I'm sorry, Evandie, but could you make up a room for Callisto? He'll be staying with us a week or so," Mervyn said, ignoring the pinched look that overtook Evandie's face. She really did not approve of Callisto. "Settle his things, please, and let me know when everything is ready."

"Yes, sir," Evandie said crisply, frowning briefly at Callisto before disappearing again.

"Would you like a tour of the house?" Mervyn asked, picking up his notebook and pen and heading back across the room to lock them back up. "You're welcome to go anywhere you like, though I do ask you stay out of the basement. It's where I work my spells, and it's usually dangerous for anyone but me to be down there."

"Okay," Callisto said, standing up slowly and pulling his jacket close around him.

"Actually," Mervyn said, picking up his glasses and tucking them into his front pocket. "Let's go down there first, and I can get you set up with the heat and pain charms."

"I won't object to that," Callisto said quietly, twisting his fingers together nervously. "Um, thank you, for everything. You'll have to let me help you in some way—"

"None of that now," Mervyn chided, gesturing dismissively. He led the way from the room, being careful to tailor his stride to Callisto's. Callisto moved slowly, probably because of his lack of heart. Mervyn stifled another flash of anger at the wizard who'd done this. He'd fix it, and then he could afford to be distracted by his anger.

"This door leads to the basement," Mervyn said, somewhat unnecessarily as he opened the door to reveal a set of stairs descending to the lower floor. "It's always unlocked, but like I mentioned before, past a certain point it isn't safe for anyone but me."

"Right," Callisto said, and he sounded exhausted. The tour could wait—certainly the house wasn't huge, and Callisto could figure everything out on his own later, after he had a chance to rest.

"Follow me," Mervyn said, starting down the stairs slowly. "The safe zone downstairs is edged in white; please don't leave the confines of the white lines without my express permission."

"Okay," Callisto said softly.

The rest of the walk down the stairs was quiet but for Callisto's slightly labored breathing. Mervyn didn't rush him, keeping his own steps slow and measured even as he wracked his brain trying to remember where he'd stored the charms he'd need for Callisto.

The pain-blocking charm was easy; it would be in one of the two health-magic rooms, probably in his emergency kit. The warming spell might be in there as well, but it could also be in the fire-magic room, since it was a heavily modified fire charm.

"I'll be right back," Mervyn said distractedly as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He ducked into the room on the far left first, sifting through the bins and boxes of charms and miscellaneous tools before finally finding the pain-blocking charm he'd been thinking of. There were also two others, one stronger and one weaker, that he'd forgotten about. Hesitating a moment, Mervyn finally picked up the strongest—having your heart replaced by a shoddy charm probably rated a high-level pain-blocking charm.

Ducking back out into the hallway, Mervyn was unsurprised to find Callisto sitting on the bottom steps, looking just as awful, if not more so, than he had earlier.

"Pain-blocking charm," Mervyn said, crossing the peeling, slightly faded white line that bordered the safe area of the basement.

The charm looked fairly innocuous, but Mervyn had never been a big fan of flashy charms that were obvious about the magic they held. The pain-dulling spell was embedded in a cheap, colorful, woven bracelet that simply tied around the wrist.

To Callisto's credit, he didn't look dismissive or disbelieving when Mervyn showed him the charm, thought it could be that he was too tired to care about much.

"May I see your arm?" Mervyn requested politely, continuing to speak as Callisto offered his right arm. "This is a high-level pain-blocker. You should still have sensation; it targets the pain and nothing else. Still, you should be careful, since you won't feel much pain unless you hurt yourself very badly while you wear it. It's also limited—it will absorb pain up to a certain point, and then the spell is done, so let me know when it wears off."

"I will," Callisto said quietly, watching as Mervyn carefully tied the bracelet's trailing ends together. A quick sigil scrawled in the air and a few murmured spell words activated the spell, and about half the tension melted from Callisto all at once.

Mervyn smiled, pleased, and Callisto smiled back, just a little.

"Are you still feeling any pain?" Mervyn asked, straightening up and letting go of Callisto's arm.

"Not ... hardly any," Callisto said, gingerly touching his chest where the heart charm rested. "It's much better."

"I'll tweak the next one, if that one runs out before I'm done with your replacement charm," Mervyn promised, pushing his hair back off his forehead.

"This one works," Callisto said, shrugging. "You don't have to go to any extra trouble."

"It's no trouble," Mervyn said absently, only half paying attention to Callisto's protest. It really wasn't—he'd have had to make the charm from scratch anyway; tweaking it to handle a little more pain wasn't that difficult. Not waiting for Callisto's reply to that, Mervyn headed into the fire work room.

Unfortunately, it was the least organized of his work rooms, since he spent the least amount of time on his fire spells. They weren't very complicated and the potential for disaster was a little too high. Mervyn liked his little house; he didn't want to burn it down, as inevitably happened to most of the wizards he knew who played with fire too much.

It was also the smallest work room, and it only took Mervyn fifteen minutes to determine the heating charm wasn't there. He headed back into the main room, ducking into the second of his health-magic work rooms. A quick search of that room turned up no charm, and Mervyn paused, trying to figure out where he'd left it.

He hadn't made it that long ago—he'd been experimenting with a new way to finish the charm ... which meant he'd probably left it in the main work room rather than putting it away properly.

Callisto was still sitting on the stairs, looking like he was dozing with his eyes open, and Mervyn flashed him a sheepish smile before he headed into the biggest work room. He did most of his spell work in here, unless it was more delicate like fire or communications charms.

The heat spell was sitting on one of the side tables, half-covered by a reference book on water charms. He picked it up, frowning at the girly locket on the necklace. He hadn't remembered that, but he doubted Callisto would care, so long as it worked. It wasn't as though it was a permanent charm.

Stepping out of the work room, Mervyn hefted the necklace as he crossed over to where Callisto was sitting at the bottom of the stairs.

"This charm is simpler," Mervyn said. "And I am sorry about the charm object; I'd been experimenting and it was handy. All you have to do is clasp it around your neck and it will begin working. It can also be taken off without breaking the spell, but only clasp it if you're wearing it, otherwise the spell will be wasted."

"Okay," Callisto said, glancing down at his still-trembling fingers. "Can you? I don't think I could manage it."

"Oh, right," Mervyn said, shaking his head. "Sure, no problem."

"Thank you," Callisto said, standing up slowly and resting a hand against the stairway wall for balance. He was slightly shorter than Mervyn, so it was an easy thing to position the necklace around his throat.

"This charm is like the pain-blocking charm," Mervyn said quietly, fumbling with the tiny clasp on the necklace and trying to not notice how close he was standing to Callisto. "It will run out after a while, so let me know when it no longer works and I'll get you a fresh charm."

"I will," Callisto said then tensed up, his breathing going ragged even as he blindly reached for the wall. Mervyn finally managed to close the clasp, dropping the necklace so the locket fell against Callisto's collarbone.

"Hey, it's okay," Mervyn soothed, hesitating, but in the end giving into the urge and wrapping Callisto in what he hoped was a steadying, reassuring hug.

Callisto didn't reply, but Mervyn didn't really expect him to, distracted as he was by the pull of energy. It lasted longer than it had last time, and Mervyn wondered if there was anything he could do to ease it for Callisto—but he probably should focus on the replacement heart charm instead.

"Sorry," Callisto muttered, pulling away from Mervyn's grip. He looked even more exhausted than he had before, and Mervyn frowned worriedly.

"Don't apologize," Mervyn said, shaking his head and letting Callisto go somewhat reluctantly. "How is the charm working?"

"Oh, um, it's working well, thank you," Callisto said, and Mervyn nodded, pleased the new spell end had worked.

"How much energy do you have left for him to take?" Mervyn asked quietly, gesturing for Callisto to head upstairs. "I hate to say it, but I don't think he's the type to ration."

"Right," Callisto said wanly, moving slowly as he started the climb back upstairs. "I think ... half? And it will replenish somewhat, though not as much as if ..."

"If you had your own heart," Mervyn finished when Callisto paused. "Okay." So he probably had roughly three days to replace the charm before the wizard drained Callisto of energy, given it had taken him three days to get Callisto down to half, though the wizard might cast more freely, the longer he pulled from Callisto, so maybe fewer than three days.

"Is there anything I can do to boost your power production, to gain more time to build the new charm?" Mervyn asked as they reached the halfway point of the staircase.

"No," Callisto said, shaking his head a little. "It just takes time. Like wizard energy?"

"Right," Mervyn confirmed, making a note to ask Denzil the same thing. He might know something Callisto didn't, or be able to give Callisto some of his energy. Mervyn waited until they reached the top of the stairs before he tapped the button on his watch to summon Evandie again, already half-distracted by the work ahead of him.

"Unless you have objections, I'll let you go rest now and save the tour for later," Mervyn said, smiling a little at the relief Callisto couldn't hide.

"I appreciate it," Callisto said, looking uncomfortable for a second before asking, "Are you sure there's nothing I can do to repay you?"

"There really isn't, and please don't worry about it," Mervyn said, wondering how he could get that thoroughly across to Callisto. Maybe Denzil could help convince him?

"Evandie," Mervyn greeted as she appeared from the staircase that led to the upstairs. "Can you bring Callisto to his room and make sure he's settled? I'll be downstairs for the rest of the afternoon."

"Yes, sir," Evandie said, gesturing for Callisto to follow her. She gave Mervyn a last disapproving look—it wasn't an encounter with Evandie unless she disapproved of something—and then led the way up the stairs.

Mervyn waited until they were halfway up before heading back down to his work rooms. He had a letter to write and a replacement heart charm to build.

Part Two

Callisto woke up thrashing, the nightmare that had frightened him awake fading rapidly. Callisto let it fade, sitting up and letting the twisted bedcovers pool in his lap. He was breathing heavily, and his heart should have been beating rapidly—but the metal charm in his chest didn't beat, and that was more unnerving than any nightmare.

Touching the charm briefly, Callisto sighed. Perhaps he should have mentioned the lack of heartbeat to Mervyn, but the wizard was already doing so much, for nothing, and Callisto couldn't bring himself to ask for even one thing more.

Even if he wasn't entirely convinced Mervyn wouldn't ask for something, once his own charm was installed in Callisto's chest. At least this way he'd know who the charm belonged to, though Mervyn did have fairy lights, so that was something.

Not that it mattered much what Mervyn's intentions were at this point; Callisto could either keep the current charm and die when the wizard drained him of power completely or he could take a chance with Mervyn and maybe get this fixed somehow.

Mervyn seemed to be good at what he did, so there was that. The pain-blocking and heating spells worked wonderfully, with no glitches or side effects that Callisto had noticed. Whenever anyone back home had gotten a health charm from the village wizard, they'd all complained about one thing or another due to the shoddy workmanship.

Hesitating, Callisto finally decided to get out of bed. Maybe a look around the house would give him more insight into Mervyn, since the wizard had managed to give away very little about himself. Was it standard practice to house clients, Callisto wondered, or was it something special that Mervyn was doing for him? To keep him off the street and keep him safe, or to keep him safe for Mervyn?

Callisto wanted to think he was reading Mervyn right, and that Mervyn was being straight with him about just wanting to help, but he'd been naïve enough to think he'd be safe in a city where no one knew him.

Except his brother, but since Denzil had told him to get lost in as snotty a way as possible, Callisto didn't really think he was going to find any trouble from that quarter. Denzil would assume Callisto had gotten home fine until he heard otherwise, and since it was a week's journey, Callisto had some leeway to get this fixed before anyone noticed.

If he was careful, he could play it off as getting distracted by the city's sights and distractions—the same excuse Denzil had used the first time he'd come to the city, but their parents had accepted it then, so they'd probably let it slide so long as he was properly apologetic.

Callisto sighed, moving slowly towards the bureau set against the far wall. The dull ache in his chest flared briefly before being countered by the pain-blocking charm, and Callisto fervently hoped that stayed working until Mervyn had the replacement charm ready.

Pulling open the top drawer, Callisto started, because all his clothes were folded and neatly laid out—including the previously dirty clothes Evandie had confiscated when she'd first settled his things. So she'd come in while he was sleeping and had managed to not wake him—that was unusual; he didn't sleep that soundly even at home.

Granted, the last few days had been anything but restful, especially since he hadn't been able to sleep very long without the pain in his chest or a nightmare waking him. Having the pain-blocking charm and a secure, if not safe, place to sleep must have knocked him out quickly and let him sleep deeply.

Callisto shook his head, forcing his mind to stop wandering. Pulling his shirt over his head, Callisto grimaced as the charm in his chest pulled against skin and muscle. Ignoring it as well as he could, Callisto picked out a fresh outfit and slowly got dressed. It took him much longer than it used to, which was sadly becoming usual. Despite the pain-blocking charm and the charm for warmth, he still got light-headed and short of breath whenever he moved too quickly.

Leaning on the bureau slightly, Callisto glanced around the room. It was daytime—probably the next day, considering how heavily he'd slept and how late in the afternoon he'd stumbled across the strange sign out front that declared "Wizard for Rent" in flowery, cursive letters.

The room wasn't huge, but it was handsome enough, with warm, pleasant colors and sturdy, if plain, furniture. It had a single painting hung above the small fireplace that depicted the Cliffs of Medrell in shades of green and blue.

A guest room, obviously, since there were no personal effects and nothing of value, Callisto decided. So perhaps Mervyn did allow clients to stay here often? Or he just lived alone and had to do something with the extra rooms, Callisto told himself firmly, pushing away from the dresser and heading for the door.

He should probably find the kitchen, Callisto decided, even though he wasn't hungry. He hadn't been hungry since...since before he'd been attacked, and he really needed to stop shying away from even thinking about it, but it was overwhelming and still terrifying and he hadn't even heard anything until it was too late, and—

Callisto shook his head. Food. He needed to eat, to keep his strength up so Mervyn's charm would seat well. Nodding to himself, Callisto stepped out into the hallway, hesitating briefly before heading in the direction he thought the stairs were.

Thankfully, they were where he thought, and he headed downstairs slowly, pausing at the bottom to catch his breath. He pressed his hand to the charm under his shirt for the thousandth time and tried not to think about anything other than breathing and what he might find for breakfast.

"Are you all right, sir?" The words were spoken in a flat monotone, but they made Callisto jump anyway. Evandie just stared at him implacably, but that was still better than the rampant disapproval she'd been radiating yesterday.

"I'll be fine," Callisto said, more quietly than he meant to.

Evandie didn't call him on it, though why she would was beyond Callisto. She nodded briskly, saying, "Follow me, then. Master Dugray said to bring you to the salon if you were up."

Callisto hesitated, but finally nodded, falling into step behind Evandie. He almost asked why, but in the end he just tried to keep up with Evandie without getting completely out of breath. Thankfully, the salon wasn't far from the stairs. Evandie knocked briskly, and then opened the door, preceding Callisto in. She said something to Mervyn, but Callisto wasn't paying her any attention, too busy panicking because Denzil was sitting on one of the sofas, holding a tea cup and looking just as surprised as Callisto felt.

Denzil didn't do magic. He had as little to do with wizards as their parents did. So he was here because of Callisto, and Mervyn had already broken one promise.

"You said you wouldn't try to find him!" Callisto shouted, sounding a little shrill but not really caring. He stumbled back a few steps, and then turned and fled. Denzil couldn't know. If Denzil knew, then he'd tell their parents, and then Callisto couldn't go home and he couldn't pretend it had never happened and—

Callisto stopped, breathing heavily and feeling more than a little light-headed. Leaning against the closest wall, he struggled to catch his breath, blinking rapidly as his eyes watered—obviously a new symptom, Callisto decided fiercely. Pushing away from the wall, Callisto moved further into the room he'd fled into. It was a massive library—two stories tall, Callisto realized with a start. There was a balcony extending out above a small army of bookcases.

More importantly, there were chairs—a matching set of chairs and a sofa—set up nearby. Callisto headed for them, grateful for the respite despite knowing how short it would be.

How much had Mervyn told Denzil? Why had he gone and found Denzil in the first place? What else had he lied about?

Pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes, Callisto tried to calm down. There had to be a reasonable explanation—maybe Mervyn had tried to track down where it had happened, looking for clues perhaps, and Denzil had been in the area?

Or maybe he'd just heard Callisto had a brother who was a fairy and had hoped to get his hands on an undamaged fairy? Except Callisto didn't remember mentioning Denzil *was* a fairy, and Denzil hadn't seemed alarmed, not that Callisto had stuck around long enough to gauge his reaction.

He didn't know what to do now. It wasn't like he could run away; he'd be dead in a week or shackled to a wizard for the rest of his miserable, and likely short, life.

"Callisto?" A quiet voice spoke from too close, and Callisto jerked upright, startled but unsurprised to see it was Mervyn who'd come after him and not Denzil. Denzil probably wouldn't want anything to do with him, now that he was wizard-tainted.

"Are you all right?" Mervyn asked, then shook his head impatiently, pushing his spectacles back into place. "That's a stupid question, of course you're not."

Callisto didn't reply to that, not sure what to say. He wasn't, and he'd already thought it couldn't get worse, but then Denzil had shown up.

Mervyn sighed, rubbing at his forehead tiredly. He sat down in one of the nearby chairs, giving Callisto some space.

"For what it's worth, I didn't know Denzil was your brother," Mervyn said, frowning in annoyance—not at Callisto, but at the library door. "He told me he didn't have any family, and I never pushed him on it."

"Then why is he here?" Callisto asked, then wished he'd kept his mouth shut. He sounded stupid, childish, and like he was about to cry. What a lovely scene he was making here.

"Oh, um, he's my consultant?" Mervyn offered sheepishly, focusing on Callisto instead of the door. "I told you I needed to consult—I never mentioned his name, did I? That would've saved a bit of trouble. I've been working with him for a few years now, whenever I need help with a project that could use a touch of fairy magic."

"Denzil doesn't do magic," Callisto protested, but then he didn't know that for sure, did he? He hadn't known Denzil was seeing someone, after all, and he didn't know what-all Denzil got up to in the city, except some trading business for their parents. He mostly lived here—it was rare when he made trips home, and then he only stayed a week or two before heading right back to the city.

"Did you tell him?" Callisto asked quietly, folding his hands together in an attempt to still their trembling.

"Yes," Mervyn said, grimacing. "I am sorry. It wasn't my intent—I only meant to help you, and to do as well as I could with this charm. I didn't think there could be any relation between you two, since you said you were from out of town, and Denzil has lived in the city for as long as I've known him."

It did make a certain amount of sense, too; if Denzil did have anything to do with magic, he wouldn't admit it to anyone, least of all family. And Callisto didn't doubt he'd keep quiet about family too, since that was what they were all taught to do, to keep the rest of the family safe if one of them was forced into a binding. Callisto never should have mentioned yesterday that he'd been looking for his brother.

"If you want, I can keep him separate from you until the new charm is ready? I'll still need his help, but I don't see why I couldn't keep you two apart if that's what you'd prefer to do," Mervyn offered, looking pensive and worried.

"He doesn't want to see me?" Callisto asked, sinking lower in his chair. But why would Denzil want to see him? He'd sent Callisto away, mad at his interference, and then Callisto had managed to get himself caught and tapped by a wizard.

"That's not—" Mervyn began, shaking his head. "Why wouldn't he want to see you? I only offered—you seemed so set against me finding him, I thought you might appreciate not having to deal with Denzil along with everything else."

"I don't know," Callisto said after a long pause, still not entirely certain Denzil would want to talk to him. He'd screwed up the first rule of being a fairy: never let a wizard know. "Denzil and I were never close. I don't know what he'd think—"

"He doesn't blame you," Mervyn said, calm and serious and sympathetic and Callisto didn't know how he managed it. He was barely holding onto his composure, and Mervyn had only gotten flustered and angry when he'd realized what the other wizard had done.

"Why not?" Callisto asked, not a little bitterly. "Obviously I did something to attract the wizard's attention. He wouldn't just go around randomly picking people to do this to."

"What if he did?" Mervyn asked, and he sounded so *sure*, but the wizard *had* to know Callisto was a fairy, else there was no reason to take the risk of replacing his heart. "You can't be the first—a wizard of his intelligence wouldn't have gotten the charm right the first time. He may still be trying to refine the charm and gotten lucky and found you."

"Some luck," Callisto muttered, but that made a twisted sort of sense. The heart charm obviously wasn't perfect, and he *had* been careful to not reveal what he was.

"Anyway, Denzil wouldn't blame you, no matter what the circumstances," Mervyn said, and he said it with such conviction that Callisto almost believed him. "He and I have been working together for a while now, and we've tricked a number of fairies out of forced bindings. He never blames the fairies, and he sympathized over your situation, even before he knew it was you."

"You tricked fairies out of bindings?" Callisto asked, not quite ready to deal with Denzil being sympathetic.

"Yes," Mervyn said, actually smiling at that. "Denzil has a high level of energy retention. He can store a lot of energy, which makes him especially appealing to wizards. We've tricked a fair few wizards into dissolving their bond with the coerced fairy, in order to bind Denzil. Usually, we bind him to me temporarily, so that the wizard we're tricking can't actually bind to him."

"What else does he do with magic?" Callisto asked quietly, a little sad that he knew so little about Denzil.

"Not much," Mervyn said, shrugging and not quite meeting Callisto's eyes. He was lying, Callisto realized, startled that it was so obvious. "He helps me with my spells sometimes; right now we're working on a spell that will allow unbound fairies to keep from being bound unless they want to be."

Callisto nodded, but he was more curious about what Mervyn wasn't telling him. Still, it was interesting that they were trying to build a charm like that—it had been tried before, of course, but most wizards had no interest in helping fairies keep their magical energy to themselves. Besides, it wouldn't really protect fairies now, not if a wizard could just tear the heart out of any fairy and draw their energy forever after.

"I know, that's not much comfort to you now," Mervyn said, sighing. He grimaced, standing and pushing the hair out of his eyes. "I can give you some time, if you prefer, to decide whether or not you want to speak with Denzil. I do need to get back to working on the new charm, however."

"I'd like some time," Callisto said quickly, then winced because how stupid was it that he couldn't even face his own brother.

"All right," Mervyn accepted without so much as blinking. "I'll have Evandie make up a tray for you in here, since I'm sure you're hungry. Unless you'd prefer to stay somewhere else?"

"Here's fine," Callisto said quietly, even if he felt less like eating now than he had earlier.

"Leave any books you take out on that table there," Mervyn said, indicating a long, narrow table set against the far wall. "Evandie gets tetchy when the books are put back incorrectly."

"Okay," Callisto said, then blurted out, "Thank you, for everything." Mervyn smiled again, and Callisto really thought he should do that more often.

"My pleasure," Mervyn said. "If you need anything, or if anything changes with the charm, tell Evandie and she'll let me know."

Callisto nodded, even as he resolved to make as little trouble as possible for Evandie and Mervyn. He'd done enough to upset the household already.

Mervyn left slowly, shutting the door behind him with a quiet snick. Callisto sighed, burying his face in his hands for a moment before finally making himself get up. He could distract himself with a book or two, keep busy and not worry about all the complications that were cropping up it had been just supposed to be a quick trip into the city and back, not this mess.

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Mervyn shut the door to the library behind him, and then stood there a moment, not really willing to face Denzil quite yet. Denzil was furious—and rightly so—but that meant he'd be hard to put off. He'd want to talk to Callisto, and Mervyn was determined to follow Callisto's wishes on the matter.

Even more unfortunately, Denzil was always the one who spoke to and kept calm the fairies for which they were doing magic. Mervyn wasn't very good at it, and he had no idea what to say to Callisto to reassure him and calm him down.

At least Callisto didn't seem to be worried about Mervyn trying something funky on him when he installed the replacement charm. That was an upside, if not a very bright one.

Sighing, Mervyn tapped the button on his watch to summon Evandie, then quickly outlined what he wanted her to do for Callisto. Oddly, she didn't seem at all put out, like she usually did when Mervyn pulled her from her routine to do something else. That done, Mervyn headed back to the salon, rubbing briefly at his forehead to forestall the headache he could feel coming.

Denzil was pacing, tension obvious in every line of his body as he irritably stalked the floor. He turned sharply as soon as Mervyn opened the door, scowling when Mervyn shut the door behind him.

"Where is he?" Denzil demanded loudly, nearly upsetting a chair as he stalked back across the room towards Mervyn.

"Resting," Mervyn said, ducking around Denzil to reclaim the seat he'd been sitting in before Callisto's dramatic exit. "You never told me you had a brother."

"And?" Denzil said defensively, crossing his arms. He made no move to reclaim his seat, but Denzil usually preferred to pace and move and throw his arms around crazily when he was upset or angry. "It never came up, did it? Besides, he's a lot younger than I am; I have almost nothing to do with him, especially since I moved here."

"What happened that night, Denzil?" Mervyn asked, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his thighs to stare intently at Denzil. "Callisto told me that you two fought, and then he left."

Denzil cursed, shaking his head. "You mean to tell me—that happened four nights ago?"

"Not long after he left, from what he told me," Mervyn said quietly, trying to soften that blow. "He said he didn't do anything obvious to attract attention, so it may have just been a wizard looking for a fresh test subject who got lucky and grabbed an actual fairy."

"Or it could be my fault," Denzil said, sitting down heavily in the chair across from Mervyn. "I meant to tell you, but I hadn't had an excuse to come over this way. I thought—I think there's someone watching me, trying to peg me."

"Okay," Mervyn said slowly, wondering if it would do any good to knock Denzil upside the head. "How long?"

"A few weeks, maybe less," Denzil said, scowling. "And shut up, I was handling it. I sent Callisto away because I didn't want them tracking him, too."

"If they're after you, and were testing on Callisto, they may have all the confirmation they want," Mervyn pointed out, even if a sibling relation was no guarantee that both of them were fairies. "Has anything happened in the last few days?"

"No, but I've been busy and on the move a lot," Denzil said, shaking his head in emphasis. "If they tried something, I missed it or they missed me."

"You should stay here, then," Mervyn said, frowning thoughtfully, then added, when Denzil looked ready to protest, "If only until we replace the heart charm in Callisto's chest."

"Okay, fine," Denzil said snappishly. "But I have to write some notes, and I'm going to find that goddamn wizard as soon as Callisto is recovering."

"I'll help," Mervyn said mildly, unsurprised at Denzil's fervor. He didn't ask about Denzil's lover, either, even if he was curious. Denzil would tell him if he wanted to, and lie if Mervyn asked.

"How is he?" Denzil asked, looking worried and guilty.

"He's scared, worried, exhausted," Mervyn said, snagging his previously discarded cup of tea and taking a quick drink before adding, "He's afraid you're angry at him, though I'm not sure if he thinks that because of your argument or because he's a power source."

"I'm not mad at him!" Denzil snapped, springing up from his seat to pace again.

"I know," Mervyn said, fiddling with his tea cup before setting it down again. "I tried to explain. I told him some of what we've done, but he's not very convinced."

Denzil muttered something under his breath that Mervyn pretended not to hear, taking a deep breath and bracing himself for the next objectionable thing he had to tell Denzil.

"Denzil," Mervyn said, waiting until Denzil turned around before continuing. "If he prefers to not see you before the charm is replaced, would you give him the space?"

"Did he say that's what he wants?" Denzil demanded, and Mervyn sighed, wondering if it was a family trait to treat hypothetical questions as facts set in stone. "No, I'm sorry, he doesn't get to hide from me."

"Denzil," Mervyn tried, but Denzil had already turned sharply on his heel and started storming towards the room. Rolling his eyes, because really, Denzil still needed to grow up in some respects, Mervyn hurried after him.

Unfortunately, there was little to do to stop Denzil when he was in a snit. Hopefully, he wouldn't upset Callisto too much, Mervyn thought, unsurprised to find the door to the library wide open again. Hurrying his steps, Mervyn slipped inside in time to watch Callisto drop the cup of tea he was holding. It spilled, and the cup rolled over the edge of the table where Callisto was seated to shatter against the stone floor.

Mervyn winced, but ignored it—it was just a tea cup.

"You don't get to hide from me," Denzil said, much more calmly than Mervyn had expected of him, considering how angry Denzil had been when he'd stormed from the salon. "I'm not mad at you, you did nothing wrong, and I'm going to find the goddamn wizard who thought he could get away with messing with you and tear out *his* heart."

Perhaps not completely calm, Mervyn conceded, hanging back in the doorway.

Callisto nodded woodenly, but before he could reply properly, he abruptly went pale, bracing himself on the table. Mervyn winced, hesitating because there really wasn't anything he could do to ease the pain of Callisto's energy being siphoned away.

"Sorry," Callisto muttered after a moment, dropping his still-trembling hands back to his lap. He didn't meet Denzil's eyes, and Mervyn wondered if he'd been noticed at all yet.

"Don't be," Denzil ordered sharply, making Callisto flinch. Denzil sighed, moving around the table and kneeling next to Callisto's chair. Callisto looked at Denzil uncertainly, before glancing up at Mervyn briefly.

"We're going to fix this, I promise," Denzil said, completely confident in every word. "We will fix this. I'm sorry, Callisto, I never should have let you go off on your own that night."

"You didn't know," Callisto said, briefly pressing a hand against the charm under his shirt. "It's not your fault."

"It could be," Denzil said, looking about as happy to admit it this time as he had been when he'd told Mervyn the same thing. "It's possible someone twigged me as a fairy. It was one of the reasons I wanted you to leave, as quickly as I could get you to go."

"But no one was close enough to overhear us," Callisto said, frowning. "Except—"

"He was with me the whole night," Denzil said, cutting Callisto off mid-sentence. "He couldn't have told anyone."

"Then it was random," Callisto said quietly. "I've never been here before, and we don't look alike, so there's no way anyone after you would know who I am in relation."

They didn't look at all alike, Mervyn realized belatedly, which was probably part of the reason he hadn't made any connection between them. Callisto was dark-haired and fine-boned, with pale gray eyes, whereas Denzil had fair hair and dark brown eyes, with a wider, more muscular frame.

"Good point," Denzil conceded after a moment, frowning. "It still could have been whomever is after me, taking an opportunity."

"Either way, you should still stay here," Mervyn interjected, stepping further into the library as Callisto and Denzil both looked his way. "It will be safer until we can figure out who is behind it."

"I was planning on it," Denzil grouched, standing up. "I need to write those notes."

"You can use the writing desk in the salon," Mervyn said. "Then meet me downstairs. I'll clear a work room for you. Give your letters to Evandie when you're done; she'll see they get to where they need to go."

"We'll talk more later, Callisto," Denzil promised. He clapped Callisto on the shoulder, completely oblivious to the less than thrilled look those words elicited.

"Okay," Callisto said quietly, and Mervyn offered him a small smile when Callisto glanced at him.

"Make sure you double-check those fire charms, Mervyn," Denzil grouched as he made his way towards the library door. "I don't want a repeat of that charbroil charm."

"You were fine," Mervyn said easily, getting a rude gesture from Denzil before he disappeared into the hallway. Mervyn waited a few beats before addressing Callisto. "I'm sorry. I had meant to give you the time, but Denzil had other thoughts on the matter, as you can see."

"It's okay," Callisto said quietly, running a shaky hand through his hair. "I should have just faced him, not tried to hide."

"Still, it was your choice to make," Mervyn said. "I will try to keep him from hovering too much; he likes to do that."

Callisto looked disbelieving for a moment, but then he just shrugged, apparently accepting it. Mervyn hesitated, at a loss what else to tell Callisto.

"I should get to work," Mervyn said, offering Callisto a brief smile, somewhat surprised when Callisto returned it with a small smile of his own. Perhaps talking with his brother had calmed him down some. Certainly having someone he knew fighting for him wasn't going to hurt. "Enjoy the library, as you can, and let Evandie know if you need anything."

"I will, thank you," Callisto said. "Sorry about your cup."

"Don't worry about it," Mervyn said, unable to keep from grinning a little. "I have plenty, and if I run low that just gives Evandie another excuse to go shopping. She likes to shop. I'll send her to come pick up the mess."

"Okay," Callisto said. Mervyn nodded briefly before turning and making himself leave before he stayed and tried to talk to Callisto more. It was odd, how much he wanted to just talk to Callisto.

It was also heartbreaking—most of the fairies he and Denzil had helped previously had been tougher, had at least anger to bolster them. Callisto was so defensive and wary and withdrawn, and it was sad, but he was completely justified in feeling that way. The best thing Mervyn could do for him was to make the charm, make it quickly, and then find Callisto's real heart for him.

Part Three

Callisto shut the book he was holding, leaning forward and setting it down on the table in front of the couch he was sitting on. Mervyn and Denzil had been gone since this morning; there'd been no sign of them since Mervyn had left to clear out a work room so Denzil could work safely.

Callisto still wasn't sure how he felt about Denzil knowing. On one hand, it was a relief that Denzil was there and knew how to help fix it. It also lent Mervyn a lot of confidence, since Callisto couldn't believe that Denzil would work with any wizard who was less than level about helping fairies, so Callisto could trust him now.

On the other hand, it meant that Callisto could never completely pretend it hadn't happened. There was also the worry that Denzil would tell their parents, on purpose or accidentally, and Callisto was sure they wouldn't be anywhere near as accepting as Denzil had been.

Of course, they'd also disown Denzil in a heartbeat if they knew he'd been mucking around with his magic again. That had been the biggest point of contention between Denzil and their parents—Denzil had wanted to learn when he was younger; their parents believed it was too dangerous to show off any magic at all, even that which could be passed off as wizard magic. Denzil had dropped it after a few years of huge arguments, and Callisto had thought that was the end of it, but obviously Denzil had only hidden it.

Sighing, Callisto reached for the next book in the stack he'd collected before settling on the sofa, wondering if Mervyn would mind if he spent the entirety of his stay inside the library. He'd already taken a short nap here earlier. Until he'd been awakened by yet another nightmare that had nearly sent him tumbling to the floor.

Drumming his fingers lightly against the silver letters on the book's cover, Callisto stared wistfully at the library. He'd always wanted to do more schooling, or at least have access to a library like this. The little town he'd lived in had only a small collection of books, most of them used for teaching reading and writing. His parents had never put much stock in it, though, more focused on keeping the orchard running—there wasn't much use for reading and writing past what was needed for that, as far as they were concerned.

Flipping open the book, Callisto trailed shaking fingers over the image displayed on the first page. It was obviously a picture of a painting, though the words beneath the image were in a language he didn't recognize. The painting was beautiful, a detailed landscape of some faraway coast, the setting sun touching off brilliant colors in the waves lapping against the shore.

Callisto smiled faintly, wondering briefly if he could recreate some of the colors—but probably not, between the lack of time his parents gave him to pursue such "frivolous activities," and the lack of any real paints at home.

Dismissing it, not really wanting to make his mood any worse, Callisto turned the page to find a depiction of another painting. There were more unintelligible words beneath it, but Callisto paid them no mind, more interested in the artwork than the words below it.

He wasn't sure how long he spent flipping through the book of paintings, but he was only halfway through when someone cleared their throat from far too close for Callisto's comfort. He jumped, barely managing to hold onto the book, but losing his page in the process.

"Sorry," Denzil said sheepishly, then sat down on the couch next to him. Callisto resisted the urge to slide further away; Denzil wasn't going to hurt him, even if Callisto would prefer a bit more personal space.

"Are you done?" Callisto asked, settling the book securely in his lap.

"I am, for now," Denzil said, shrugging as he sprawled out across the sofa. "Mervyn needed to start actually building the charm, since the spell can't be embedded in just anything. I'd just be a distraction for that."

Callisto nodded, curling his fingers around the edges of the book of paintings. "How—how long will it take him?"

"At least a day, maybe two," Denzil said, frowning in thought. "It's hard to say. He's also going to be laying preliminary spell work, and it can be hard to tell how they'll change as they're laid and whether they'll all weave together the way we plan, or if Mervyn will have to do a lot of tweaking throughout his casting."

Callisto nodded again, not really sure he understood that. Fairy magic, as far as he knew it, was simple. It either worked or it didn't; it was all or nothing. There was no interweaving of spells and the magic couldn't be embedded in objects like wizard magic often was.

"So what are you reading?" Denzil asked after a short, somewhat uneasy silence. Callisto hesitated, but then simply handed Denzil the book.

"This is in Kaplir," Denzil said, giving the book a skeptical look.

"I'm not *reading* it," Callisto said, more harshly than he meant to. Sighing, he gestured at the book impatiently. "Look inside."

Denzil flipped the book open to a random page, displaying a colorful portrait of an older man wearing a blue and red uniform. "I see," Denzil muttered, flipping through a few pages before looking back at Callisto. "Want me to get you some ... stuff? Then you can do your art thing here instead of just looking at it."

Callisto muffled a snort, somehow managing to say politely, "No, thank you."

"You sure? I don't mind, and it would give me some errands to run while Mervyn is doing his thing," Denzil said, and he probably meant well, but Callisto couldn't take it. Denzil had always been dismissive

of him, and while he probably meant well, he didn't even know what Callisto was interested in past 'art stuff'." He wasn't even paying attention; if he had been, he never would have offered.

"You're not supposed to leave," Callisto said stiffly, skirting around the art issue because he didn't want to get into a fight with Denzil. "There's someone watching you."

"If they haven't done anything yet, they won't," Denzil said dismissively. "Do you still carve? I could find a shop—"

"Denzil," Callisto said sharply, scowling. "No. I can't—" He cut off, not wanting to say he couldn't do anything. Instead, he just held out his hands, displaying the tremors that made his fingers shake.

"Oh," Denzil said, subdued. Thankfully he turned his attention back to the book, flipping through a few more pages. Callisto sank down into the couch cushions a little more, wishing Denzil would find somewhere else to be so he could go back to enjoying the fragile peace he'd managed to find before Denzil had shown up.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Denzil asked, not two seconds later, and Callisto really just wanted him to stop it. Denzil was never this nice or solicitous, and Callisto couldn't tell him to stop, to go away, because Denzil was just trying to help.

"No," Callisto said, shaking his head. "I'm fine. Stop—stop trying to make it better. I'm okay with this." Callisto made an abortive gesture towards the rest of the library, though he didn't really know what he was trying to point out.

"Sorry," Denzil said, pausing as he handed Callisto the book of paintings. "I'm trying to help, and I can't help Mervyn anymore without getting in his way. I'm not very good at sitting around."

"You never were very good at that," Callisto said, wincing at a flare of pain. It lasted only a second before the pain charm neutralized it, thankfully, and Callisto was going to have to find some way to repay Mervyn for everything he was doing.

"No, I wasn't," Denzil said, smiling ruefully. He slouched down against the couch, looking thoroughly put out about it. "I should have stuck closer to home, been around more. I'm sorry, Callisto, I never should have made you go that night. I was selfish and stupid, and I didn't want to hear that mother and father wanted me home for some stupid reason or another."

"You couldn't know," Callisto said, wishing Denzil would let that drop. Endeavoring to change the subject, Callisto continued, "Mervyn won't accept payment."

"He usually doesn't," Denzil said, shrugging dismissively. "One of the reasons I did the fairy lights for him."

"How do I say thank you, then?" Callisto asked, feeling stupid to even be asking it. The way Denzil brushed it off, it seemed as if Mervyn's not accepting payment was no big deal.

"Saying it usually works," Denzil said flippantly, and Callisto wondered why he'd even bothered.

"Never mind," Callisto muttered, deciding he was sick of the library. Or of Denzil, at least.

"Letting him help is actually a big thanks," Denzil said more seriously. "We run into a lot of fairies who won't let him help because he's a wizard and of course they're all the same. Even with my reassurances, he's untrustworthy at best, and I'm deceitful at worst."

"I was letting him help even before you showed up," Callisto said, wincing as another flare of pain caught him by surprise.

"You okay?" Denzil asked, and Callisto nodded. He really didn't need Denzil mothering him to death on top of everything else.

"It's as good as it gets," Callisto said flatly when Denzil just stared at him unblinkingly for a long moment.

"Okay, okay, sorry," Denzil said, then asked hesitantly, "How bad is it?"

Callisto didn't answer for a second, then decided to go with the least offensive answer he could come up with on short notice. "It's better with the charms Mervyn gave me."

"I know some fairies that can do pain-blocking—"

"No," Callisto snapped, standing up quickly and regretting it. He caught his balance on the arm of the sofa, scowling at Denzil. "You're not going anywhere; I don't need more pain-blocking, and I don't want anyone else to know!"

"It's not your fault, Callisto," Denzil said, frowning worriedly. "You know that, right? You didn't do anything wrong."

"I know," Callisto said, probably more harshly than was necessary, but Denzil still wasn't listening. "I know, but not everyone will think that. I don't want—I don't want it to get home. The fewer people who know, the better."

Denzil winced then nodded. He knew their parents; they were incredibly old-fashioned when it came to fairy-wizard relationships. Any sort of wizard taint on either Denzil or Callisto, and they'd pretend to not know them.

"I won't tell them," Denzil said, standing up as well. He was unfortunately taller than Callisto, but Callisto refused to let that get to him. He wasn't going to feel sorry for his outburst. "I wouldn't be that cruel, Callisto, and they don't know anyone here except me and a few old business acquaintances."

"I know," Callisto said. It wasn't that he didn't trust Denzil, but before Denzil had shown up, there had been no way for him to know that Denzil didn't share the same mindset their parents had. It had never come up before, and Denzil definitely hadn't seemed open to magic and wizards and to *helping* fairies who'd gotten unfairly bound.

"Let me know if you change your mind about the fairy pain spell, hmm?" Denzil said, and Callisto just nodded dully, tired all over again now that the anger had drained out of him. He really should just go back to his room and rest some more, but he was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to take the books from the library.

"We will fix it," Denzil said, stepping forward and looking rather like he was going to hug Callisto.

Callisto took a hasty step back then turned it into a turn towards the door as it opened. Mervyn stepped into the library, looking distracted as he shut the door behind him. He held a sheaf of papers in one hand, and there was a smudge of dirt or something on his left cheek.

"Oh, Denzil, there you are," Mervyn said, shuffling the papers he held. He gave Callisto an absent smile then frowned a little. "There's a schematic I need you to look at, but I think I left it in the work room."

"I thought you were done with me," Denzil said, stepping forward to stand just behind Callisto. Callisto tensed a little—stupid, because it was just Denzil—but he really didn't want anyone too close, not until it was all fixed.

"It's not for that," Mervyn said, shaking his head. "It's related—I put together a new design for a pain charm. I think it will be more effective, based on what you told me earlier, and if it works I can incorporate it into the heart charm."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Denzil said, briefly resting a hand on Callisto's shoulder before slipping past him. "I don't think the charm he's got now is working completely."

"Denzil," Callisto hissed, giving into the urge to smack Denzil on the arm. "It's working fine."

"Ow, hey," Denzil protested, but then he grinned. "If it's working fine, then why do you keep wincing?"

"Because..." Callisto started, but trailed off, frustrated he couldn't explain it. It hurt, but it was manageable, and he was just taken by surprise sometimes.

"Denzil," Mervyn said, getting their attention. "It should be in the work room we were in earlier. Go look at it, please."

"Going," Denzil said lightly, giving Callisto a crooked smile before heading towards the door. A second later, he was gone, leaving Callisto alone in the library with Mervyn.

"I have a few questions for you," Mervyn said, gesturing with the papers, and that really shouldn't make Callisto nervous. Questions weren't bad. "Can we sit?"

"Okay," Callisto said, stifling a sigh. He returned to his seat on the sofa where he'd been sitting before. Mervyn sat down in one of the adjacent chairs, thankfully, though he was self-contained enough that Callisto wouldn't have minded if he'd sat on the sofa too.

"First, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to," Mervyn said, solemn and utterly serious and that wasn't helping Callisto's nerves any. Callisto nodded, twisting his fingers together and wondering

what was worth hesitating over when Mervyn had had no trouble asking him anything about the heart charm yet.

"I want to get the man Denzil is seeing checked out, for Denzil's safety. I trust his judgment, but he can be impulsive and it's ... it's gotten him in trouble in the past," Mervyn said, and Callisto blinked, startled. That wasn't at all what he'd expected. "Unfortunately, he's being much more secretive this time. I don't know anything about his lover, not even a name."

"His name is Baldric," Callisto said quietly, hoping Denzil wouldn't be too upset when he found out what Mervyn was doing. But if Denzil got to be protective and smothering, then Callisto would do the same right back. "That's all I know. He had dark hair, and he was shorter than me. Um, his face was kind of squashed-looking, though I really only got a short look at him, so none of that could be accurate."

"That's more than I had," Mervyn said, smiling ruefully. "Thank you."

"I don't want him hurt," Callisto said, wondering what trouble Denzil had gotten into in the past. Probably Baldric wasn't anyone dangerous, and Denzil would get huffy, but that was what he got for being an interfering jerk on Callisto's behalf.

"I'll let you know what my Inspector contact pulls up," Mervyn said, jotting down a few notes. "How are the warming and pain spells working, really? I want you to be as comfortable as possible until we can replace the heart charm."

"They *are* fine," Callisto said emphatically then sighed. "Sorry. They really are working well. The warming spell is perfect, and the pain-blocking spell blacks most of the pain. I just get ... flashes of pain. They go away quickly."

"That sounds like the charm is wearing off," Mervyn said, looking at him with something akin to alarm, "and not that it's not functioning correctly."

"Oh," Callisto said quietly, feeling stupid. He probably should have figured that out.

"I'll get another charm put together tonight," Mervyn said, making another notation on his paper. "The modified design should last longer ..." Mervyn trailed off, obviously lost in thought as he scribbled notes on the papers braced against his lap.

Callisto stayed quiet, letting him work, though he itched to protest and tell Mervyn to focus on the heart charm.

"Sorry," Mervyn said a moment later. "Um, the other thing—" He paused, shuffling through his papers before pulling out a drawing. He passed it to Callisto, who took it gingerly, setting it on his lap with shaking fingers.

"The drawing is terrible, I do apologize for that," Mervyn said, somewhat sheepishly. "Drawing never was my forte, much to my professor's discontent. But that's, roughly, the new charm. It's not perfect, but I built it on the assumptions that we want to get a replacement in as soon as possible, and that eventually we'll be able to reinstate your own heart."

"Okay," Callisto said, staring blankly at the scribbled charm. A few of the spell marks looked familiar, but most of it was gibberish to him. "I don't—"

"Oh, right," Mervyn said, shaking his head. He stood up, moving to stand next the arm of the couch where Callisto was sitting. "Here, this, overall is the charm, right?" Mervyn drew an ink-smudged finger around the outline of the charm. "I'll be making that tomorrow, since it needs to be custom."

Callisto nodded. That made sense—he highly doubted there was enough demand for custom-made heart charms that Mervyn would be able to go out and simply purchase one.

"What will it be made of?" Callisto asked, trying not to fidget. Mervyn smelled of ink and paper and something sharp and clean, and he really shouldn't be noticing something like that right now.

"A steel composite. It's durable, water-proof, and I can sterilize it easily," Mervyn said, leaning a little closer and pointing to a few of the spell marks. "Those will help keep you from getting sick, too. The charm you have now isn't very efficient, which is why your hands shake and you get cold, and everything else, too. The wizard who cast the charm spells was very ... unpolished about it. He probably didn't do so well in the health magics, which is why he used an aluminum base for the charm."

"The base makes that much difference?" Callisto asked, baffled. Wizard magic was far too complicated.

"It can, but in this case, the part of the spell he set up to take over your heart's function is also inefficient; the wizard who cast it took a lot of shortcuts that are exacerbating your symptoms," Mervyn said, then gestured to a thick cluster of spell marks, none of which looked even remotely familiar to Callisto. "The current charm just cycles your blood continuously, and obviously not quickly enough. This row gives you a heartbeat, though it will restrict you some. The charm will work fine for simple tasks—walking, sitting, sleeping, but if you try to do anything more strenuous, you'll start experiencing the symptoms you're currently experiencing. I think I have an idea on how to get it to work at variable rates, but that will take me a few days to work out, and it's something I can add in after we switch out the charms."

"Okay," Callisto said, taking a moment to process that. So he'd have a heartbeat, and Mervyn's heart charm would work well as long as he didn't strain himself. "What do those do?"

"They keep down inflammation and just generally help everything work more smoothly," Mervyn said, then tapped another spell mark. "And that will help cut down any pain around the charm, since a metal charm magicked into your chest is always going to hurt some."

"How did Denzil help?" Callisto asked curiously, handing the paper back to Mervyn. "It looks like all wizard marks."

"It is," Mervyn said, moving back to his own seat. "He helped me pick which spell marks would be most effective. For every spell mark I showed you, there are at least two similar marks that do nearly the same thing. Denzil's good at picking which ones work best with fairy physiology."

"Oh," Callisto said, frowning. Where had Denzil learned something like that?

"The outside plate of the charm will show all the spell marks, which will make it easier if any other wizard has to do work on it for whatever reason," Mervyn said. "Not that I think it will be necessary, but I do like to be thorough."

"Okay," Callisto said, refusing to give into pessimism and wonder how long the wizard would keep his heart alive after the charms were switched out. "Thank you for explaining it all."

"No problem," Mervyn said, smiling a little as he shuffled his papers back together. "I like to explain my magic, as I'm sure Denzil can tell you."

"It's interesting?" Callisto offered, because under any other circumstance he'd be fascinated to see wizard magic up close. "I like knowing how it's put together."

"Well, good," Mervyn said, smiling. He ran a hand through his short hair, disheveling it and only adding to the messy, absent-minded professor look he had going on. "Do you have any other questions? I'll probably spend most of tomorrow making the charm, and then we'll do the operation the next day."

"How long will it take?" Callisto asked, wondering how he'd manage to avoid Denzil for another day. Probably best to hide in his room, if only to enjoy the quiet and actually rest before Mervyn swapped the charms.

"I'm not sure?" Mervyn said, looking pensive. "I've done some extensive charm work before, but nothing quite like this, so it will probably take a while."

"Oh," Callisto said, wondering if he should be worried about that. But Denzil trusted Mervyn, and Mervyn had already proven to be much better at magic than the wizard back home had been, so Callisto resolved to not think about it. Dead by Mervyn's charm was better than dead from an unknown wizard draining all his energy. "Um, would it be okay if I took some books up to my room?"

"What? Oh, of course," Mervyn said, obviously not expecting that question. "There are a few in that case there that you shouldn't, but anything else is fair game."

"Thank you," Callisto said absently, glancing briefly at the glass-fronted case Mervyn had indicated. It looked expensive, as did the books inside, and Callisto immediately marked it off-limits. He didn't want to accidentally ruin anything rare or expensive after everything Mervyn was doing for him.

"Anything else you want to know?" Mervyn asked, and Callisto shook his head. There were probably things he should be asking, but nothing was coming to mind.

"Well, if that changes, don't hesitate to have Evandie come and get me," Mervyn said, folding his papers in half around his pen. "I'll try to give Denzil some busy work, too—to keep him from fretting and pestering you to death."

"I'd appreciate that," Callisto said, then winced because that sounded terrible. "He means well, I know."

"He does, but he can be overwhelming with it," Mervyn said, sympathetically. "He can mother hen with the best of them, though he'll deny it if you ever tell him so."

"He really does," Callisto said, smiling a little at the thought of calling Denzil a mother hen to his face. Maybe Callisto would try that if Denzil got too pushy.

"Enjoy the quiet while it lasts, then," Mervyn said, giving Callisto a last smile before heading out of the library, papers in hand.

Callisto watched him go, absently pressing a hand to his chest at another flash of pain. It subsided quickly, and Callisto stood as soon as it had passed. Collecting together the books he'd gathered, Callisto brought them to the table and left all but the book of paintings and a book of poems he hadn't yet read. Then he left the library, heading upstairs to his bedroom. Hopefully Denzil would be sufficiently distracted by whatever tasks Mervyn gave him that he wouldn't pester Callisto until much later.

Part Four

"Coffee, please, Evandie," Mervyn said quietly then let himself into the dining room. Unsurprisingly, Denzil was already there, eating a full plate of toast, eggs, and at least three different meats.

"Morning," Denzil said, the greeting somewhat subdued. Mervyn just nodded, taking the seat across the table. Evandie bustled in a moment later, bearing a small tray with a pot of coffee, two cups, and a plate of biscuits and fresh fruit.

"Thank you, Evandie," Mervyn said absently, accepting the cup of coffee she poured and drinking half of it immediately.

"Should I go wake Callisto?" Denzil asked, nodding his thanks to Evandie when she handed him his coffee, tainted with a heaping dose of cream.

"Let him rest," Mervyn said, applying himself to his food. Callisto wouldn't be allowed to eat until after the operation was complete, and Callisto really could use all the rest he could get.

"Right," Denzil said, frowning at his plate before continuing to eat. Mervyn followed his example, trying to focus on his food and not the upcoming spell work.

It should work, but Mervyn really would have been happier if he'd had more time to test, to research, and to track down the wizard who'd done this in the first place. But he didn't, and it really couldn't wait. Callisto had already burned through two pain charms, and he was getting dangerously low on energy; once his magical stores ran out, no doubt the wizard would start pulling his life energy. They probably didn't even have a full day left before it got to that point.

So it had to be today, and it had to go right the first time, or else Callisto would die anyway.

Mervyn sighed, pushing those thoughts away, and focusing instead on running through the procedure in his head again. It really was simple, in theory, but there was no procedure quite like this in any of the health magic books he'd had Denzil look through.

Doubt would only make the procedure harder, Mervyn reminded himself. He was a good wizard; he could make it work. Denzil was fantastic at his magic, as well, and he was all the more invested in this casting because Callisto was his brother. They would make it work, and then they'd find the miserable, spineless piece of scum who'd thought he could get away with doing something this terrible.

"Any prep left?" Denzil asked, fidgeting with his utensils, obviously anxious to get started.

"I did it all last night," Mervyn said, then took pity on Denzil and added, "If you want to go double-check everything, we're going to be working in the center room. Then you can go wake Callisto, and I'll meet you down there."

"Okay," Denzil said, finishing the last of his coffee in a large gulp. He left the room quickly, leaving Mervyn alone with his breakfast. Mervyn ate as much of it as he could and finished a second cup of coffee as well before heading downstairs to his work rooms.

Denzil and Callisto weren't there yet, and Mervyn busied himself checking over the equipment for the fourth time as he waited. Everything was in its place, unsurprisingly, so Mervyn moved on to going over his notes again until Denzil led Callisto into the room. Callisto was pale, as usual, and there were deep purple shadows beneath his eyes attesting to the lack of sleep he'd been getting.

"Good morning," Callisto said, then rolled his eyes, but let Denzil help him up to the table in the center of the work room.

"Good morning," Mervyn said, smiling a little because he couldn't seem to not smile at Callisto. "How are you feeling? Anything new?"

"Nothing new," Callisto replied, and Mervyn took that to mean that Callisto still felt terrible, but it wasn't any worse.

"Did Denzil explain how this is going to work?" Mervyn asked, turning and fetching the first charm from one of the tables pushed against the wall.

"I wasn't sure on all the details," Denzil said, then flashed a grin and added, "And I know how much you like to explain things."

"I'm going to give you a new charm," Mervyn told Callisto, ignoring Denzil because that was what that comment deserved. "It has three purposes: to block pain, to put you to sleep, and to keep you from moving."

"Okay," Callisto said, sounding exhausted, and Mervyn really hoped this worked.

"I'm going to remove your other charms, the warming and the pain-blocking," Mervyn said, frowning. "Then we have to test this one, because I don't want you awake or in pain, and while I'm confident, I'd rather be sure it works."

"Me too," Callisto said softly. "Do you need me to do anything?"

"Take off your shirt," Mervyn said absently, fussing with the charm. "Then we'll remove the other charms and put this one on. Once you're definitely out, we'll take it off, and you can let me know if any of it didn't work."

Callisto nodded, pulling off the loose shirt he'd been wearing. Mervyn blinked, suddenly recalled to the fact that Callisto had a fine chest. Then he remembered himself and stepped forward to the table's side. "Lay down," Mervyn requested quietly. Callisto did so, resting his head on the small pillow at the end of the table and holding himself stiffly.

"Relax," Mervyn said, trying for soothing but not quite sure he managed it. Callisto nodded anyway, and he made an effort, but didn't really manage to relax much. The charm should take care of that, in any case, Mervyn thought, recalled to what he was doing.

"I'm going to remove your charms now," Mervyn said, setting down the new charm they'd be using for the duration of the operation. It was near identical the pain-blocking charm Callisto currently wore—just a simple, woven bracelet.

"Warming charm first," Mervyn said, half to himself. Callisto nodded anyway, twisting the chain of the necklace he wore so that Mervyn could get at the clasp. Mervyn carefully undid the clasp, then pulled the necklace free and tossed it across the room. It landed with a semi-loud clang against a sheet of scrap metal against the far wall, making them all jump.

"Pain charm next," Mervyn said, ignoring Denzil's glare. "Ready?"

"Do it," Callisto said, quiet and terse. Mervyn picked up a pair of nearby scissors and carefully sliced through the pain-blocking charm around Callisto's wrist. He tossed the scrap of bracelet aside and forced himself to ignore Callisto's half-smothered, pained cry and the way his entire body tensed. Instead, he focused on the new charm, wrapping it deftly around Callisto's wrist.

It took only a few spell words to activate, and it worked immediately. Callisto relaxed completely, slumping against the table top bonelessly. Denzil shifted restlessly behind him, but he stayed quiet; that had been something he'd learned quickly, and Mervyn appreciated having an assistant who didn't pester him with questions every few seconds about what he was doing.

Even—especially, really—when it was his brother they were working on.

The charm appeared to be working. Callisto was asleep and relaxed, which meant he couldn't be feeling any pain. Still, Mervyn waited another minute more before carefully unweaving the closing on the spell. As soon as he spoke the last of the unweaving spell, Callisto half sat up, clutching at his chest and gasping for air. Mervyn flinched back, startled despite having braced himself for a strong reaction.

"It's okay, hey, hey," Mervyn said, stepping back up to the table's edge and resting a hand on Callisto's bare shoulder. Callisto's skin was cool and clammy, but that was to be expected, so Mervyn dismissed it as unimportant.

Callisto froze at his touch, and then abruptly slumped. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Mervyn repeated firmly, guiding Callisto to lie back down. "Did you feel anything? Were you aware at all?"

"No," Callisto said, shaking his head a little. "I don't remember anything."

"Okay, good," Mervyn said encouragingly. "I'm going to put the spell back on, then, unless you have objections?"

"No. Do it, please," Callisto said, quiet but determined. He glanced past Mervyn towards where Denzil was standing, smiling faintly at whatever expression Denzil had. Mervyn glanced back at Denzil to see if he wanted to say anything, but Denzil just gestured for him to go ahead, so he must have said everything he thought needed saying earlier.

Speaking the spell words to activate the charm again, Mervyn tied the bracelet firmly around Callisto's wrist. Callisto went limp again, and Mervyn took a deep breath before gesturing for Denzil to approach the table.

"Are you ready?" Mervyn asked, though he was positive Denzil wouldn't say no, not when it was Callisto and they were nearly out of time. Denzil's part was more difficult than Mervyn's, however—he had to keep Callisto's blood moving while diverting it from spilling out through the heart's main blood vessels.

"Yes," Denzil said, frowning briefly. "You?"

"As ready as I'm getting," Mervyn said, going through the procedure in his head once more before nodding. "Let's get started, then."

Denzil nodded, handing Mervyn the first and most important tool—a charm breaker. It would interrupt the charms that kept Callisto's blood moving, but it would also interrupt the charms that held the replacement heart in place and allowed the wizard to pull energy from Callisto.

"It will take about ten seconds to activate," Mervyn said. Unnecessarily, since he and Denzil had been over this at least two dozen times, but the procedure of it was comforting.

"Go ahead," Denzil said, carefully lacing his fingers with Callisto's.

Mervyn nodded, setting the medallion on top of the metal plate in Callisto's chest. Looking up at Denzil, Mervyn waited until he nodded to speak the spell words that activated the charm breaker. The heart charm went *clank-clank-clank* then whirred for a moment before deactivating with a small click. Callisto didn't move at all, though his breathing hiccupped for a moment before resuming at a slightly faster pace.

Matching Denzil's, if he'd done his part already. Which he would have, and Mervyn needed to focus on his part, not Denzil's, because Denzil always did his part.

Mervyn picked up the charm breaker and tossed it towards the same corner he'd thrown the warming charm earlier, ignoring the clank it made as it landed. Then he carefully pried the heart charm from Callisto's chest, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. Denzil leaned forward, carefully scrutinizing the hole—gauging the extent to which he needed to allow blood to flow.

The charm had completely cut through the ribs normally in place over the heart, which would be difficult to replace when they got Callisto's actual heart back. Mervyn would worry about that when they got to that point, however; for now he'd taken it into account, and he'd have to fuse the replacement charm with the ribs to provide enough support for the remaining bone structure.

"How's that?" Denzil asked, sounding a little strained. Mervyn didn't comment, however, merely leaned forward and examined the blood vessels for any signs of leaking or that they weren't getting enough blood.

"Looks good," Mervyn said, frowning at the hole in Callisto's chest for a moment before moving to start the next step of the operation.

The rest of the procedure passed in a blur of blood and magic and focusing on the tiny details that could make or break whether the charm stayed seated and working. He wasn't sure how much time had passed since they'd started, but it had definitely been hours. The new charm seemed to be working well, at least. Denzil had stopped supplementing Callisto's blood flow and breathing and both seemed normal, if not healthy, in Callisto.

They were just cleaning up the work room now, and keeping an eye on Callisto. Mervyn would have to give the work room a thorough scouring later, but a little bit of tidying would do for now.

"Will the charm last?" Denzil asked, frowning at the discarded heart charm that Mervyn was carefully washing in the corner.

"It draws his own energy to run," Mervyn said distractedly, studying the charm. It was strange, the contrast of lackluster spell charms and the detailed workmanship that had gone into the physical charm. "It won't run out until he does."

"The charm that's keeping him asleep," Denzil clarified. "What are you doing with that?"

"Cleaning it," Mervyn said, setting aside the offending charm. "It might give me a clue about the wizard, if he was sloppy enough." Mervyn sighed, crossing the room to the table's side. He tapped the charm bracelet that kept Callisto asleep. "This will last until tomorrow morning at least."

"Okay," Denzil said, glancing towards the door. "Should we move him now?"

"Probably," Mervyn said, stretching and trying to work the kinks and aches out of his arms and shoulders. "Before we're too tired to. I'd rather he not wake up in here."

"Me either," Denzil said, frowning at the messy work room. "Not that the recovery room is much better, but it's still better than here."

"Mmm," Mervyn hummed in agreement, making a note to stop postponing the redecoration of the recovery room. It was never high on his priorities, since he didn't often do work that his clients couldn't simply walk away from.

After Callisto was back upstairs, he'd make sure it was safe for Evandie and let her loose on it. She'd had to deal with a lot of upheaval lately; giving her free reign to decorate would help soothe that.

Moving to the corner of the room, Mervyn dug out the cart he'd modified to work as a stretcher of sorts and unfolded it with a loud squeak, followed by a louder crack as the joints popped into place. Denzil

had already unhooked the clasps that held the table top to the frame, so it was a somewhat simple matter of shifting the table top to the modified cart and wheeling it out of the room.

The recovery room, as Denzil had dubbed it, was more of a closet than a room. There were no windows and precious little furniture simply because the room was too small to fit much. A bed was shoved against the wall under the stairs, and a small table was wedged into the corner between the bed and the opposite wall. A bright lamp sat on the table, providing all the illumination for the little room.

It was a tight fit with the makeshift stretcher, and Mervyn wished briefly that he hadn't burned all his bridges at the hospital; having access to their resources and space would have been wonderful at times like this.

A few minutes later, Callisto was settled and Mervyn wanted to do nothing more than take a long shower and then collapse. Denzil looked just as tired as he felt, however, so Mervyn wasn't going to be selfish.

"First watch or second?" Mervyn asked, wheeling the makeshift stretcher back out of the recovery room.

"First," Denzil said firmly, and Mervyn didn't argue, well-acquainted with the look Denzil was giving him.

"All right, help me move this back and we'll shove a chair in there," Mervyn said, deciding to put the sofa in the other health-magic work room to use in case there was an emergency.

Denzil nodded and helped him replace the table top. Mervyn dragged a spare cozy chair from the fire work room out, ignoring the few scorched marks in the fabric, and Denzil helped him maneuver it into the recovery room, shoving it in between Callisto's bed and the opposite wall.

Callisto already looked healthier, or so Mervyn liked to think. His color was better, though the dark circles beneath his eyes would only be cured with lots of rest—something he'd hopefully be getting now. If the heart charm stayed seated, anyway, but they'd done everything they could so worrying about it at this point just wasted energy.

"I'll have Evandie bring you something to eat and some strong tea," Mervyn said, running a hand through his hair and probably tangling it beyond any reasonable attempts to straighten it. "Wake me if you need anything or if he takes a turn for the worse. Otherwise, I'll be back to spell you in a few hours."

"Thanks," Denzil said, sitting down heavily in the chair and frowning worriedly at Callisto. Mervyn left him to it, too tired to try and find the words to reassure Denzil. What was there to say that Denzil didn't already know? Putting it out of his mind, Mervyn retrieved the charm to summon Evandie, then went to find a few hours of rest as soon as she headed off to fix a tray for Denzil.

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Callisto woke up slowly, groggy and unsettled, though it took him a moment to attribute it to the strange heartbeat resonating from his chest. It was close to a real heartbeat, but there was something

off about it that Callisto couldn't peg. It was that, or he'd just been too long without a heartbeat and didn't recognize it as normal now that he had one.

Still, a heartbeat was a heartbeat. Callisto wasn't going to complain, especially since, other than that, he felt almost normal. He ached some, and his chest flared with pain whenever he moved, but it didn't hurt like the previous charm had. He didn't hurt, he felt warm enough, and his hands, when he held them up, didn't so much as twitch.

So it had worked. Callisto smiled a little, sitting up to peer at the charm in his chest. The spell marks were showing, like Mervyn had said they would. It was somehow better than having a plain metal plate stuck to his chest, even if he'd much rather have no metal sticking out of his chest.

Glancing up and around the room, Callisto frowned. He didn't recognize where he was, but that probably meant they were still in the basement, especially given the lack of windows in the room. They, because slumped in a chair next to the bedside—barely crammed between his bed and the far wall—was Mervyn. He was fast asleep, the remnants of a half-eaten tray sat next to him on the tiny bedside table.

Why was Mervyn sitting at his bedside? Where was Denzil? Shouldn't his chest hurt more than it did? Frowning, Callisto glanced down at his wrists, but the only charm he was wearing was the one Mervyn had put on him before they'd removed the old heart charm. If that charm was still working, he'd still be asleep. Unless he'd misunderstood something about the way the charm worked, which was always possible.

Toying with the charm bracelet for a moment, Callisto debated what to do. He could go back to sleep, but he was a little afraid of waking up feeling worse later since he actually felt all right now. He could wake Mervyn, but he didn't want to disturb him, either, not after all the work he'd put into Callisto's new charm.

Callisto fidgeted with the blankets pooled in his lap, frowning at the door. He could try to figure out where he was, but he didn't want to accidentally trigger some charm if they were still in the basement. Without Mervyn or the white line—which wasn't visible from where he was—there was no way to tell if he was in a safe zone or not.

So he would wait. Mervyn would wake eventually, and then Callisto could figure out where he was and what happened next. How long would it take for them to find the wizard who had his heart? Would the wizard even bother keeping it alive now that he couldn't draw energy for his spells from Callisto? Despite Mervyn's reassurances to the contrary, Callisto wasn't sure at all the wizard who'd attacked him would hold onto his heart for any reason.

Frowning, Callisto shifted, pushing the pillow up against the wall and leaning against it. He stared at the door for a moment, then at the pattern on the comforter, but neither proved distracting, and Callisto wanted to do something loud to wake Mervyn or bring someone else running, but in the end he just slumped against the wall and hoped something broke the silence soon.

He was busy tracing the ugly flower pattern in the blankets when a set of footsteps finally approached the little room. Callisto looked up expectantly, unsurprised when Mervyn didn't stir—he looked to be sleeping heavily, which was part of why Callisto hadn't wanted to wake him.

A moment later, the footsteps paused, and Denzil pushed the door open. He smiled when he caught sight of Callisto sitting up then rolled his eyes at Mervyn, still fast asleep.

"How are you feeling?" Denzil asked, entering the room completely and kicking the chair. Mervyn stirred, frowning confusedly as he blinked awake.

"Good," Callisto said simply, hiding a smile as Mervyn wrinkled his nose at them both.

"You're awake," Mervyn observed, then glanced up at Denzil, who was hovering over his chair menacingly. "Denzil."

"Mervyn," Denzil said, and Callisto got the feeling he was missing something, but he didn't know what. Perhaps Mervyn wasn't supposed to be there? "You said you were fine."

"I was," Mervyn said, sitting up straight and wincing, probably at some ache he'd gotten from sleeping in a chair. "At first. I must have dozed off recently."

"Right," Denzil said, obviously disbelieving. "You should have come and gotten me as soon as you got tired."

"Are you finished scolding me?" Mervyn asked, sounding more amused than annoyed. "Can I make sure Callisto is doing all right now?"

"I suppose," Denzil said, giving Callisto a quick grin as Mervyn stood up. He immediately stole Mervyn's seat, propping his feet up on the edge of the bed.

"How do you feel?" Mervyn asked, ignoring Denzil.

"Good," Callisto said, wondering if he should detail how. "I—why doesn't it hurt more? I mean, I know you said there was a pain-blocking charm, um, as part of the heart charm, but shouldn't it hurt more?"

"I modified it some," Mervyn said, moving right up to the bedside. He frowned thoughtfully at Callisto's chest for a moment before continuing. "I added another pain-blocking charm to last the duration of your healing. It won't block everything, but it will let you heal more quickly, and you will be a bit less restricted with your movements. That said, if you start feeling a lot of pain, let me or Denzil know immediately."

"I will," Callisto said quietly and tried to ignore the question of how long he would be here and how long it would take before everything was back to normal. He was starting to think there would be no going back to normal, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that yet.

"Good," Mervyn said, then gestured for him to move closer. "Any of the other symptoms lingering? You're not feeling cold or short of breath?"

"No, it's all good," Callisto said, shifting to the edge of the bed. Mervyn backed up a step so he could swing his legs off the side of the bed, and then stepped close again.

"And your heartbeat is regular?" Mervyn asked, gently probing at the edges of the charm, where Callisto's skin was still red and inflamed. Callisto winced—*that* hurt, where just sitting hadn't.

"I think so," Callisto said, trying to ignore that Mervyn was feeling up his chest and that Denzil was just sitting there watching.

"Okay, well, we can check that," Mervyn said, dropping his hands and stepping back. "Denzil, you're better at that, can you?"

"Fine," Denzil said, though the look on his face said he was anything but okay with it. "What's wrong with it?"

Callisto shrugged, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. "I might just not be used to it," Callisto said, but then his curiosity got the better of him. "How are you going to check it?"

Denzil hesitated, glancing at Mervyn, who just stared at him blankly. "I learned a bit of health magic from a fairy that Mervyn and I freed from an unwanted binding. I can feel out your heartbeat and see if there's anything unusual about it."

"Oh," Callisto said, wondering why Denzil was downplaying it. He'd be willing to bet that Denzil knew more than a little magic—but if he didn't want to tell Callisto, that was his business, even if it hurt. "What do I have to do?"

"Give me your hand," Denzil said, and he didn't seem very happy about having to do this, and Callisto really, really wished he'd just shut up and dealt with it. Denzil grabbed his extended hand, frowning slightly, and then Callisto's hand started to tingle. A second later, he could almost *feel* two heartbeats: his, steady and unchanging, and Denzil's, faster and stronger. Perhaps that was all it was? His new heart wasn't as strong as his real heart had been?

"It's not a perfect replica," Denzil said distractedly, frowning at nothing. "It's close, but I think you're missing some strength in the simulated ventricle contraction." Callisto stared at Denzil blankly, but Mervyn was nodding as he stared at the heart charm, so apparently what Denzil was saying made some sort of sense.

"That should be easy enough to fix," Mervyn said thoughtfully. "Is everything else working well?"

"Yes," Denzil said, detangling his hand from Callisto's. The second heartbeat abruptly disappeared, and Callisto blinked, disconcerted for a moment. Denzil stepped back, sitting down heavily in the chair. Mervyn frowned at him, but didn't say anything about Denzil's odd behavior, and Callisto wasn't going to push. Denzil obviously didn't want to admit to his magic for some reason.

"I'll work on adapting the heartbeat, but I'd like to wait and see if anything else needs tweaking before I make any changes to the charm. Are you hungry?" Mervyn asked.

"Yes," Callisto replied, startled to realize he really was.

"Good," Mervyn said, turning to Denzil. "Go have Evandie make up a tray, will you, Denzil? No coffee, only herbal tea."

"Yeah, yeah," Denzil muttered, and he looked decidedly upset about something—probably having to admit he knew more than a little about magic. Callisto had already figured that out though, and he didn't care, even if he'd wished Denzil would just *tell* him instead of sulking about it.

"Any other side effects of the charm?" Mervyn asked as Denzil's footsteps thumped up the stairs above their heads. So they probably were in the basement, since Callisto didn't think there were any rooms under the stairs on the first floor.

"No," Callisto said belatedly, shaking his head a little in emphasis.

"Good," Mervyn said, smiling faintly. "Don't hesitate to let me know if that changes, all right. Do you have any questions?"

"Why is he so upset?" Callisto asked, frowning at the empty doorway. He probably shouldn't be asking Mervyn that, but it wasn't as if Denzil would tell him, and he and Mervyn seemed close enough that Mervyn might actually know.

"Because he's an idiot," Mervyn said, both amused and exasperated. "He does a lot of magic, and he's good at it, but he doesn't like to admit it."

"I thought so," Callisto said, making a face. "I think—it's something we grew up with. Our parents are both fairies, and they taught us—they don't think that we should use our magic. They think it will only get us in trouble, and they only ever use theirs if they need to heal or graft a tree."

"I thought as much," Mervyn said, smiling ruefully. "But you don't seem upset, and I think it would help Denzil to know that."

Callisto nodded, fidgeting briefly before glancing around the little room again. "Where are we?"

"Still in the basement," Mervyn said, confirming Callisto's suspicions. "We didn't want to move you back upstairs until we were sure the charm had taken, since all of my equipment is down here."

"Oh, that's why you were sitting with me?" Callisto blurted out, then immediately regretted it. It seemed he really was feeling better, since he usually stuck his foot in his mouth on a regular basis.

Mervyn didn't seem annoyed, though, just laughed sheepishly. "Yes, right up until I fell asleep on the job."

"You looked tired," Callisto said then vowed to keep his mouth shut because he really was saying the stupidest things today.

"Still, I shouldn't have nodded off," Mervyn said, making a face. "If you're feeling up to it after you eat, we can move you upstairs, since it looks like the charm is doing well."

Callisto nodded, crossing his arms over his bare chest and wishing he had a shirt. It was a little chilly and a little discomfiting, sitting on the edge of the bed half-naked. "So what happens next?"

"I'll work on refining your charm, and you'll rest for a few days. Then we'll find the wizard and get him locked up," Mervyn said, moving over to the discarded chair and sitting down. "I have an investigator looking into the whole thing, so hopefully he'll be able to track the wizard down quickly."

"He's not going to keep my heart alive, is he?" Callisto asked quietly, trying not to get upset about it, but failing miserably. It would be next to impossible to hide the charm in his chest from his parents, and he didn't know what else to do besides work on the orchard.

"I don't know," Mervyn said, just as quiet and subdued. "He may think you're dead, but if he's a good wizard, he may be able to tell you're alive. In that case, he might keep your heart alive in case you were able to track him down."

"And if he doesn't?" Callisto asked, wondering if he could live with a metal heart for the rest of his life.

"We'll make that charm perfect," Mervyn said firmly. "If not better than a real heart. I won't let you have anything less if you have to walk out of here with a charm in place of your heart."

"Okay," Callisto said, keeping his doubts to himself. Mervyn had already done so much for him; how much more would he do before he started thinking of Callisto as a burden?

"When I said we'd fix it, I meant it, Callisto," Mervyn said, smiling crookedly, and Callisto flushed, feeling terrible. "Not, I'll fix it halfway and then you're on your own. If you have to stay here for years while I perfect it, so be it. I'm not going to force you out or give you anything less than my all. I still think there's a good chance we can recover your heart and replace it, and I won't give up on that until I have no other choice."

"I'm sorry," Callisto said, slumping dejectedly. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Mervyn said, smiling more genuinely. "I can't imagine it's easy, what you're going through. Just know that I'm not going to give up on you, okay?"

"But why not? I mean, what's in it for you?" Callisto asked, then cringed because that really was a terribly rude thing to ask right after the promises Mervyn had made.

"Did you know that I've never done anything like this before?" Mervyn asked, and he didn't sound offended, at least. "Which probably isn't very comforting, but one of the things I enjoy most about magic is learning more about it. I wasn't just trying to calm you down when I told you that the first time. I like doing new things with magic, and I like knowing that what I'm doing is helping people and affecting them in a good way. I've had my fill of wizards who give lip service to how they like to help people when they really mean they like the paycheck that comes with working with people, but won't lift a finger when there's nothing in it for them."

"Okay," Callisto said then sighed, exasperated with himself. Was that really all he could say? "I'm sorry, I just—people always want something, and my parents are always, always going on about how terrible wizards are, and you're not, not at all, and I—I just don't know anything."

"It's okay, really," Mervyn said, giving him a real smile. Callisto flushed, wondering how he'd managed to find the one good wizard in the city. "You should have seen Denzil when he first realized I was a wizard. He was much worse than you, and he had no reason to think I knew he was a fairy, either."

Callisto smiled at that—Denzil was much more outspoken than he was, so that probably hadn't gone well at all.

"Yes, it went about that well," Mervyn said cheerfully.

Callisto started to ask more—Mervyn had said something about how he and Denzil had met before and Callisto was curious—but the sound of stomping footsteps on the stairs above their head cut him off. Denzil appeared a moment later, looking noticeably happier than when he'd left. He was also carrying a tray that held a steaming mug, a steaming bowl of oatmeal, and a plate of toast cut into little triangles.

"I may have annoyed Evandie," Denzil announced cheerfully, passing the tray to Mervyn, who leaned forward and set it on the bed next to Callisto.

Part Five

"What did you do?" Mervyn asked, sighing.

"Nothing," Denzil said, trying and failing to look innocent. Callisto smothered a grin with a bite of toast, and it really was sad, but it was the most delicious thing he could remember eating in ages. "I just stood there. She was the one who threw silverware at me."

"You shouldn't antagonize her while you're sleeping here, Denzil," Mervyn said. "She's going to be in a snit all day, and you'll probably end up with a short-sheeted bed or something."

"I know," Denzil said, not sounding the least bit upset about it. "She doesn't like me much," Denzil confided to Callisto as he started in on his oatmeal. "I don't know why; I've never been anything less than perfectly nice to her."

"You're not fooling me," Callisto said, shaking his head. "You were always 'perfectly nice' to Aunt Claris, too."

"She likes you," Denzil said, then added thoughtfully, "But then, Aunt Claris did too."

"Evandie likes me?" Callisto asked, confused. She hadn't seemed to, especially the first time they'd met. She'd looked ready to pitch him back out onto the streets head first.

"She asked how you were," Denzil said, as though that was the ultimate proof. "She never asks about any of Mervyn's victims."

"Clients," Mervyn corrected, rolling his eyes.

"That's what I said," Denzil said earnestly. Mervyn sighed, but ignored him, which was usually the best means of dealing with Denzil.

"Unless you have objections, Callisto is going to move upstairs when he's done eating," Mervyn said, changing the topic and distracting Denzil.

"Are you sure? I thought we were going to have him down here an entire day after he woke," Denzil said, and Callisto really hoped that wasn't going to stay true. He'd probably go stir-crazy in a few minutes left alone in this tiny room. At least his bedroom upstairs was bigger, even if it had just as little to distract him.

"He's doing better than we originally thought," Mervyn said, shrugging. "And there's nothing to suggest the charm is going to stop working."

"And you feel up to two flights of stairs?" Denzil asked, turning to Callisto.

Callisto nodded, hastily swallowing a mouthful of oatmeal. "I think so."

"Good," Denzil said, smiling at that. "Then upstairs it is, but you have to let us know immediately if anything changes along the way."

"I will," Callisto promised, finishing off his oatmeal and pushing the tray away. "We can go now?"

Mervyn laughed softly, standing up and pushing the chair back against the wall behind him. "Okay, but take it slow, all right? Do you remember what I told you about how the charm works when you exert yourself?"

"It doesn't keep up," Callisto repeated dutifully. "So I have to take it slow and pay attention to how what I'm doing is affecting me."

"Exactly," Mervyn said, giving him another smile.

Callisto pushed the blankets away then carefully moved the tray to the side table so he didn't accidentally upset it when he got up. He slid off the bed, standing up, and suddenly he was all the more aware that he wasn't wearing a shirt. He'd come down with one, but who knew where that had ended up.

"Oh, hold on a moment," Mervyn said and slipped out of the room.

"I don't have any idea," Denzil said when Callisto glanced at him quizzically. The sound of a door opening and closing came from somewhere outside the tiny room, and a moment later, Mervyn reappeared. Holding Callisto's shirt as if he'd read Callisto's thoughts. He passed it off to Callisto, and Callisto carefully shrugged it on, wincing a little when his chest protested the movement.

"Ready, then?" Denzil drawled then led the way out into the hallway.

The trip upstairs was slow, but not half as slow as Callisto had had to take it with the previous charm. Still, he was a little winded when they reached the top of the stairs, and he really hoped Mervyn was able to tweak the charm to fix that soon.

"Good to keep going, or would you like a short break?" Mervyn asked, glancing towards the door to the salon. "You could sit in there for a bit, if you like."

"Okay," Callisto agreed, because that was better than going up to his room where there was nothing to do but rest. "I mean, I'd like."

"Denzil, get the door," Mervyn ordered, flashing a smile at Callisto when Denzil started grumbling. He moved ahead of them, though, and Mervyn kept pace with Callisto, probably to support him if he faltered, which was nice.

Denzil opened the door, mock bowing the two of them in, and Callisto shook his head, a little exasperated but glad that Denzil seemed to be in a better mood. Stepping into the salon, Callisto faltered, half-turning towards Mervyn when Mervyn steadied him.

Mervyn looked surprised, too, so he hadn't known Baldric was sitting on the other side of the room, either. It was only the surprise that had made Callisto falter, of course, never mind that Baldric was currently staring at Callisto as if he were a particularly rare specimen to be examined.

"What are you doing here, Baldric?" Denzil demanded from behind Callisto, not sounding at all happy. "I told you I'd come see you in a few days."

"I'm sorry," Baldric said, his attention switching lightning quick to Denzil. "You sounded so worried in your letter. I wanted to see if there was anything I could do." His face was still squashed-looking, Callisto thought somewhat meanly, then immediately felt contrite. It wasn't as though Baldric could do anything about that.

"Here, sit down," Mervyn said quietly, guiding Callisto to a nearby chair. Denzil glanced at them, obviously displeased again then crossed the room. He pulled Baldric out of his chair and into the far corner of the room, saying something too quietly for Callisto to hear as they went.

Mervyn took the seat next to Callisto, glancing over at where Baldric and Denzil were having a hushed conversation. He leaned closer to Callisto, murmuring, "You were right, his face is squashed. Think he was dropped on it as a child?"

Callisto snorted, stifling a laugh. It was mean of him, especially since Denzil obviously cared about Baldric. He was still touching Baldric's arm lightly, and they were standing closer together than normal people would. Denzil was also obviously getting less angry as Baldric spoke to him.

"...a few more days, okay?" Denzil said, loudly enough that those words carried across the room. Baldric nodded, and Callisto looked away, giving them a little privacy, because whatever Baldric's faults, Denzil obviously cared about him.

"How are you doing?" Mervyn asked quietly, pitching his voice so it wouldn't carry across the room.

"Good," Callisto said just as quietly, studying his lap for a minute before glancing at Mervyn. "When will you hear from your investigator?"

"On this?" Mervyn touched his chest lightly. "Or the other?"

"Um, both," Callisto said, though he'd mostly meant Baldric.

"A few days," Mervyn said, frowning a little. "Maybe a little longer on the—" Mervyn tapped his chest again.

Callisto nodded, wondering if there was any realistic chance of finding the wizard who'd stolen his heart. It had been ages, practically, and surely any wizard with the nerve to steal a heart and then let his victim go would have covered his tracks well.

"I'll try to make Denzil stop hovering," Mervyn said, apparently misinterpreting the look on his face.

"Good luck," Callisto muttered, smiling a little because it was sweet of Mervyn to offer that, but Denzil was going to be nigh on impossible to avoid now.

"Thanks," Mervyn said, smiling wryly. At least he seemed to know what he was getting into on that front. "I'll at least make sure he rests properly, even if I have to have Evandie drug his tea. She likes doing that."

Callisto smothered another laugh, wondering what those two had against each other. "You should get some rest, too. Not in a chair."

"I will," Mervyn said, smiling at him. "But you shouldn't worry about me. Denzil is likely to try and camp in your room until he's satisfied the charm isn't going to give out suddenly."

"He can try," Callisto said, not looking forward to trying to convince Denzil to give him space. Hopefully with Mervyn's interference it wouldn't be too difficult.

The cessation of quiet voices from the far corner abruptly drew Callisto's attention back to Denzil and Baldric. They were crossing the sitting room slowly, and while Denzil still didn't look pleased, he looked resigned to Baldric's presence.

"Baldric, this is my friend Mervyn and my brother, Callisto," Denzil said, not sounding too pleased about it. "Mervyn, Callisto, this is Baldric. He's leaving now, but you'll probably see him in a few days."

"Nice to meet you," Mervyn said, standing to shake Baldric's hand. "You really must come for tea or dinner, as soon as Denzil lets you."

"Very funny," Denzil muttered, even as Baldric laughed.

"I'll make sure of it," Baldric said, smiling easily, it did nothing for his appearance, and Callisto wished he could peg what it was he didn't like about Baldric, aside from his face.

"All right, come on," Denzil said, obviously impatient to have Baldric gone. Probably because of Callisto, though if Mervyn made a habit of sending investigators after Denzil's beaux, that might be part of it as well. Baldric laughed again, but obediently allowed Denzil to herd him from the room. Callisto shook his head, hoping his heart problem wasn't interfering with Denzil's relationship.

Except it obviously was. Denzil was staying here, both because of Callisto and the ubiquitous threat hanging over his head. He'd probably had to cancel more than a few things with Baldric over the last few days.

"What's wrong?" Mervyn said, reclaiming his seat next to Callisto. "You look upset."

"Nothing," Callisto replied automatically. Mervyn frowned at him worriedly, obviously not convinced. Callisto grimaced, but finally said, "Denzil shouldn't be here, he should be ..." Callisto trailed off, not sure how to articulate what he was trying to say.

"No, he's right where he should be," Mervyn said firmly. "He may be overbearing and terrible at comforting, but he's your brother and he cares about you Callisto. Don't sell yourself short. You're much more important than a squashed-face flunky he's only been seeing for a month or so."

"How do you know?" Callisto asked then hurried to clarify so Mervyn didn't think he was doubting that Denzil cared. Callisto knew that, but if the danger to him was past, and it seemed it was since the heart charm was working well, then why did Denzil need to stick around? "That they've only been seeing each other for a few months?"

"Denzil is terrible at keeping secrets," Mervyn said, smiling faintly. "He would have let something slip shortly, and I was already suspicious. Usually he spends more time over here."

"Oh," Callisto said, biting his tongue to keep from saying anything else incredibly stupid.

Mervyn really did know Denzil well—probably better than Callisto did. Granted, Callisto hadn't seen much of Denzil the last few years, since he had moved to the city and spent most of his time there. Their parents somehow hadn't seemed to realize that Denzil probably wasn't coming back to work on the orchard anytime soon, if ever.

Mervyn frowned, opening his mouth to say something more, but thankfully Denzil chose that moment to reappear, slightly red-faced. "You're not allowed to check up on him," Denzil said immediately, dropping into a nearby seat heavily. "Not even a little."

"Seth?" Mervyn asked, not looking particularly moved by Denzil's words. Good, since Mervyn had already set his investigator on Baldric. "What does he do?"

"He's an administrator at the local branch of the city hospital," Denzil said grudgingly. "He lives in a tiny apartment in the Halin district. He's not a wizard."

"Mmm," Mervyn said, neither agreeing or disagreeing.

"Just let him do it, Denzil," Callisto said, cutting them off before they got a full-scale argument going. "It would make me feel better."

Denzil hesitated, but then sat back in his chair, grimacing. "Fine. But nothing intrusive, and you better not set that bastard Malone on it."

"Too late," Mervyn said, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "He's the best at discreet, Denzil. He's also trying to track down anything he can find regarding Callisto's attacker."

"Why am I surprised?" Denzil muttered. "Fine, whatever, but I reserve the right to hit the bastard if he annoys me."

"Malone annoys you by breathing," Mervyn said, smiling a little. "I'll keep you two separated, don't worry."

"Thanks," Denzil said dryly.

Callisto blinked, wondering why Malone-the-Investigator was so terrible. But it was Denzil, and Denzil was good at rubbing people the wrong way. Covering his mouth with his hand, Callisto tried unsuccessfully to hide a yawn.

"All right, upstairs to bed with you," Denzil said, then pinned Mervyn with a glare. "And we'll be discussing this more later."

"Of course," Mervyn said tiredly. "I do hope he turns out to be what he says he is, for what it's worth."

"I know," Denzil muttered, helping Callisto to his feet. "Come on, Calli, to bed with you."

"Don't call me that," Callisto protested, though honestly he was surprised Denzil hadn't slipped before this. Denzil just grinned and hooked an arm through his, giving Callisto a little support, but not trying to completely support him.

"I'll get Evandie to bring some calming tea upstairs for you both," Mervyn said, following them from the room, but heading towards the kitchen instead of the front stairs. "It will help you both sleep better."

"You'll be resting too," Denzil said, his tone making a statement of the words rather than a question. "Callisto is doing fine; you don't need to rush right back down to your labs."

"Work rooms," Mervyn corrected, even though technically they could almost all be classified as labs. "I planned to, and since Callisto is doing so well, we can leave him to rest without anyone watching over him."

"Of course," Denzil said, rolling his eyes, but Callisto suspected he'd meant to try. "Though I would feel better if he had a way to alert us if he runs into any trouble."

"Ah, that's simple enough," Mervyn said, pushing up his sleeve and unfastening the watch that he almost always wore. He handed it to Callisto, pointing to a button above the winding knob. "Just press that button if you run into any trouble; it will summon the other watch, which I'll get from Evandie."

"Okay," Callisto said, too tired to protest he didn't need it. He'd been fine a few moments ago—but he'd also had a major operation, and he had to stop forgetting that just because he wasn't feeling much pain.

"Don't be afraid of waking one of us, either," Mervyn said sternly, fixing Callisto with a pointed look. "You're not being a bother, and I'd rather know sooner than later if the charm isn't doing what it's supposed to be doing, in any way."

"I will," Callisto said, sighing. He wasn't a child, and he wasn't stupid, despite what Mervyn and Denzil apparently thought. "I'm not—" Callisto bit back the rest of his retort, not really wanting to snap at Mervyn. "I won't do anything stupid."

"I don't think you will," Mervyn said, smiling sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I'm letting my tiredness get to the better of me. Go on, get some rest before I keep you down here all night with my nagging." Denzil snorted, but let that go, pulling Callisto towards the staircase. "Sleep well, both of you," Mervyn said.

"You, too," Callisto said, hesitating a step before finally allowing Denzil to pull him up the stairs. The trip up was quiet—Denzil didn't try to strike up a conversation, and Callisto was too tired to try to speak up himself.

Thankfully, the stairs to the second level were shorter and somehow less arduous than the stairs up from the basement. Callisto was only a little light-headed by the time they reached his room. Denzil hovered by the door as Callisto made his solitary way over to the bed, waiting until Callisto sat down before speaking.

"Sleep well, Calli. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Me too," Callisto said, letting the stupid nickname slide this time. "Thank you, for everything you did."

Denzil smiled, bright and happy, and Callisto was glad he'd given into the urge to say something. "Anytime," Denzil said lightly, then added, more solemnly, "I mean it, Callisto. You ever need anything, just ask."

"I will," Callisto said quietly. "Thank you."

Denzil gave him a last smile before slipping back out into the hallway, presumably to head to his bedroom for some sleep. Callisto sighed, wishing he had the energy for a bath, but that would have to wait until later. Flopping onto his back, Callisto stared at the ceiling about his head for a moment before moving slowly to get beneath the covers.

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Mervyn spoke the last few words to the charm's spell slowly and clearly, smiling when the spell took on the first try. He'd had his doubts—there were some nonstandard spell words included—but if the charm worked, he could better build more changes into Callisto's heart charm in the future.

Provided he had to. Hopefully Malone was finding out something about Callisto's attacker. He should be dropping by any day now, Mervyn thought distractedly, examining the long strip of scrap fabric he'd incorporated the charm into. Everything was as it should be, however, though if it worked, Mervyn would just incorporate the spells directly into the charm in Callisto's chest.

Standing from his seat in front of the work bench, Mervyn tucked the charm into a pocket. He took a moment to stretch and try and work out the kinks that sitting bent over the table had given him. It didn't work especially well, but Mervyn was long used to the sore muscles that came from spending too many hours hunched over with no breaks. He too often got completely involved in what he was working on to realize how much time had passed, to the detriment of his posture.

Leaving the work room, Mervyn headed upstairs, wondering briefly what time it was. And where Callisto was—though that really was no mystery. Callisto spent most of his daylight hours ensconced in the library, reading one book after another. Mervyn would be worried that Callisto wasn't resting enough, but Evandie had reported finding Callisto napping on the sofa more than once, and Mervyn had actually caught Callisto at it once himself.

The more challenging question was where Denzil was. He'd been sulking and doing his best to avoid Mervyn ever since Baldrick had shown up. Mervyn really shouldn't be surprised; Denzil was always sulky when Mervyn checked up after a new beau, but he absolutely refused to let Denzil walk into another trap like his first city-beau had been. Denzil would get over it, probably more quickly this time since Callisto had asked so nicely.

Dismissing Denzil from his thoughts—Mervyn wouldn't need him for this change, at least—Mervyn headed down the hallway towards the library.

Sure enough, Callisto was half-sprawled across one of the chairs by the empty fireplace, a thick book sitting on his lap and a studious expression on his face. He didn't look up, not even when Mervyn shut the door behind him. Mervyn paused a second to click the lock into place, since he knew Callisto wasn't exactly comfortable with anyone seeing the charm in his chest.

Normally, Mervyn would have Callisto come down to his work rooms for all the supplemental charm work, but he wasn't keen on making Callisto make that trip more than he had to, especially while the charm didn't work as well when Callisto exerted himself.

Mervyn cleared his throat softly, trying to gently alert Callisto to his presence. Callisto looked up slowly, obviously half-entranced by whatever he was reading. "Hello," Callisto said, shutting the book and shifting to sit up from his slumped position in the chair.

"How are you feeling?" Mervyn asked automatically, crossing the room to where Callisto was sitting.

"Good, as long as it don't try to do too much," Callisto said. He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand for a moment before dropping it back to his lap.

He did look better, Mervyn decided, pulling one of the nearby chairs close to Callisto's seat. Callisto's face had more color than it had prior to the new heart charm being installed. He no longer looked as if he were seconds from passing out, either. He also blushed a lot, which he hadn't before—probably because his body couldn't spare the blood—and Mervyn really shouldn't be noticing that.

"I have a supplemental charm to install for you," Mervyn said, pulling the strip of fabric from his pocket. "It should fix the problem with your heartbeat and make it easier for you to do some exerting activities, like climbing stairs."

"Okay," Callisto said readily, curiously eyeing the spell marks visible in black against the creamy yellow of the strip of fabric.

"These are a little more complex," Mervyn said, frowning as he tried to think of a simple way to explain them. Draping the fabric across his palm, he held it closer to Callisto to display the spell marks. "This one

is mostly to correct the ventricle contraction, but it also strengthens your entire heartbeat and helps keep the rhythm of the heartbeat steady when you exert yourself."

"And this one?" Callisto asked, pointing to the second set of marks, just as elaborate and even longer than the first set of marks.

"That—" Mervyn hesitate, then finally said, "Without going into too much detail, that one monitors some of your body's functions to determine if you're doing something strenuous and increases the output of your heart charm accordingly."

"Okay," Callisto said, frowning as he squinted at the marks. "But it doesn't—it only works a little?"

"Right. There are a lot of internal indicators in your body that would normally push your heart into beating faster," Mervyn said. "This new charm doesn't monitor them all, so it doesn't know to push the output of your heart charm as far as it needs to go for all types of strenuous activities."

"Oh," Callisto said then smiled. "That makes sense. Thank you."

"Sure," Mervyn said, smiling back. Probably somewhat stupidly, but he liked magic, and he liked talking about it. "If you ever want me to explain anything more thoroughly, just ask. I like to talk about magic."

"I will," Callisto said, smile turning shy as he held out his wrist for Mervyn to fix affix the charm around.

"If this works well, with no tweaks needed, I'll incorporate it directly into the heart charm," Mervyn said, carefully tying the strip of fabric into place around Callisto's wrist.

"Okay," Callisto said, holding still beautifully. His fingers didn't shake even a little anymore, Mervyn noted. He murmured the activation for the charm, watching Callisto carefully as he finished. Callisto gasped, then grimaced before his expression cleared.

"How does it feel?" Mervyn asked cautiously, aware that he was still holding onto Callisto's wrist.

"Really good," Callisto murmured, then his eyes widened, and he turned red. Mervyn stifled a laugh. "I mean, it feels normal. Good. Like a real heartbeat."

"Good," Mervyn said, unable to keep from smiling at how easily Callisto flustered. "We should probably test the other part of the spell before we make it part of the charm."

"Okay," Callisto said, and Mervyn belatedly let go of his wrist.

Standing, Mervyn waited for Callisto to follow suit before heading for the back of the library. The library was the main reason he'd bought his house nearly ten years ago. It was two stories, though the upper level was only half the size of the lower, to give a wonderfully high ceiling to the sitting area and fireplace.

"How are you doing?" Mervyn asked as they reached the back of the library, where a tiny wrought-iron staircase curved up to the second floor.

"Good, but I could do this before without any problem," Callisto said, looking up the staircase with a slight frown.

"Well, it wouldn't do to have the new charm negatively affect that," Mervyn said absently, glancing up the stairs himself. "Ready?"

Callisto nodded briefly, taking a deep breath before heading up the stairs slowly. Mervyn waited a few steps before following, not wanting to crowd Callisto, but not willing to risk having him pass out and fall, either. Callisto made it to the top without trouble, and he was smiling when he turned around, which was a good sign.

"Much better," Callisto said, quiet but obviously enthused nonetheless.

"Good," Mervyn said, pleased. It would probably take a few more supplemental charms to get the heart charm to the level where it would be doing everything a real heart would, but that this first charm worked was a wonderful sign. "I think—let's go down, up and down, give it a real work out."

Callisto nodded obligingly, heading back down the stairs with no hesitation. Mervyn followed him down, but then stayed there as Callisto went upstairs and came back down a second time. Callisto moved more quickly, more assuredly, as he did the second climb up the stairs, and Mervyn grinned, pleased beyond measure that he'd managed to so successfully replace Callisto's faulty heart charm. Such health-magic could have many applications, provided the right wizards were creating the charms.

"It's good," Callisto said, stopping at the foot of the stairs. "I didn't get dizzy or light-headed at all."

"You're not out of breath," Mervyn observed thoughtfully. He'd have to have Denzil check on Callisto's blood flow later, but the supplemental charm was obviously doing Callisto no harm, so Mervyn could add it to the main heart charm and have Denzil check out Callisto's blood flow later.

"I feel good," Callisto said, his cheeks turning pink again. Mervyn graciously ignored it, biting back another smile.

"We'll add it to the main heart charm, then," Mervyn said, heading back across the library to where they'd been sitting earlier. "I'll probably have Denzil check your blood flow later, but that's just to be on the safe side."

Callisto nodded, and he fell silent for a minute before asking, "How does Denzil know to do that?"

"Um," Mervyn said, hesitating. Would Denzil care if Mervyn said something. Probably. Would Denzil ever tell Callisto himself? Probably not. "Denzil is training with a fairy who works as a nurse of sorts. She's either adapted her magic to health-magic or more likely managed to learn it from another fairy, and she's teaching Denzil."

"How does she keep secret she's a fairy?" Callisto asked, confusion written across his face as he resumed his seat by the empty fireplace.

"She doesn't. Her bonded wizard died some years ago, and she survived," Mervyn said, and Callisto nodded. Fairies who survived their bonded wizards dying couldn't bond again, though no one was sure why. Mervyn hesitated, then eschewed sitting down for kneeling in front of Callisto. "Remove your shirt, please?"

"Right," Callisto said, flushing again as he hurriedly tugged off the loose shirt he was wearing. "How does Denzil keep secret he's a fairy?"

"He also doesn't, but I don't think people know he's doing more than helping Shalla out. She's an older lady, and he boards with her under the pretense of helping her out with the things she can no longer do," Mervyn explained, digging out the small knife he kept in his boot.

"Who's with her now?" Callisto asked, sitting stock still—even breathing shallowly—as Mervyn examined his chest. The charm. He was examining the charm for the best place to add in the supplemental spell words.

"Her grandson," Mervyn answered belatedly then smiled. "Actually, her grandson is the investigator I have working on finding out more about Baldric and the wizard who stole your heart."

"Is that why Denzil doesn't like him?" Callisto asked, flinching a little when Mervyn sliced through the fabric with the supplemental charm, dispersing the magic.

"Partially," Mervyn said, setting both his knife and the scraps of fabric aside. "He's also a wizard, and he didn't tell Denzil that immediately. Denzil hates wizards, for the most part, though he's got good reasons."

"You're a wizard," Callisto pointed out, shifting a little in his seat. "How does a fairy have a wizard grandson?"

"I did say typically," Mervyn said with a smile. "Shalla's husband was the wizard she was bonded to—they had a handful of children, and I believe some of them took after her with fairy magic and some took after her husband with wizard magic."

"Oh," Callisto said, looking thoughtful. He didn't voice anymore questions though, and Mervyn wondered if he'd ever encountered a wizard-fairy couple. They were rare, these days, but once upon a time such matches had been common—and unforced.

"Ready? This casting will probably take a while," Mervyn said, then deliberately shifted a little closer to Callisto. Predictably, Callisto flushed, though only a little this time.

"Go ahead," Callisto said quietly, jerking in surprise when Mervyn reached out and touched the metal outer plate of the heart charm.

Smothering a smile, Mervyn shut his eyes and focused on weaving the supplementary spells into the heart charm. It was a long spell, though he'd done longer, and by the time he'd finished the closing on the supplementary spells his voice was hoarse. His arm was also aching a little from being held out in

front of him, but Mervyn ignored that, flexing his arms a few times as he leaned closer to Callisto's chest to study the new spell marks.

Callisto tensed up when he leaned closer, and Mervyn really shouldn't be teasing him so much, but he couldn't seem to help himself. The new spell marks seemed to be in order, and Mervyn smiled in satisfaction, sitting back.

The sound of a throat clearing behind him made Mervyn jump and he turned towards the sound, frowning a little.

Part Six

"When did you get here?" Mervyn asked, a little puzzled that Denzil would purposely put himself in the same room as them, since he was supposed to be ignoring them. Or Mervyn, at least. Add to that, he'd ignored the locked door, so there was probably a real reason he'd tracked them down.

"A few minutes ago," Denzil said then paused, deliberately eying the way Mervyn and Callisto were sitting, with Mervyn kneeling between Callisto's legs. "What are you casting?"

"Supplemental spells to fix the heartbeat and strengthen blood flow," Mervyn said, turning back to Callisto. "How is it this time? Same as before?"

"It feels right," Callisto said, and his cheeks were pink again, and he wasn't really looking at either Mervyn or Denzil. Taking pity, Mervyn shuffled back and stood up, giving his legs a minute to get blood flowing through them before handing Callisto his shirt and moving to sit down heavily in a nearby chair.

"Good," Mervyn said, somewhat belatedly as Callisto dressed again. "Denzil, would you mind checking his blood flow? I was going to ask you later, but since you're here now, I can make any necessary tweaks right away."

Denzil snorted, and Mervyn wondered when Denzil would start lecturing him to stay away from his little brother. Probably the next chance he got, Mervyn decided, as Denzil deliberately stepped between the chairs Callisto and Mervyn were sitting in. Callisto immediately offered his hand, and Denzil took it, frowning in concentration.

"It's better," Denzil announced after a minute. "The heartbeat is perfect, and I don't think you could get resting blood flow any better."

"Good," Mervyn said, pleased. He stretched his legs out in front of himself, fighting a yawn. "So what did you come looking for us for, Denzil?"

"Malone is here," Denzil said sourly, turning to frown at Mervyn. "Did you really have to ask him?"

"He's the best investigator I know," Mervyn said lightly. He glanced at Callisto, but Callisto just looked grave and resigned, and Mervyn didn't know what to say to reassure him. "Did he say what he was reporting on?"

"I didn't talk to him, Evandie did," Denzil said, sounding as annoyed as he always did when Malone came up in conversation in any way.

"We'd all better go, then," Mervyn said, wincing as his knees cracked when he stood. Denzil signed, but obligingly headed for the door, falling into step with Callisto and giving Mervyn a suspicious look as he

followed behind. Mervyn just stared back innocuously, biting back a smile when Denzil snorted and turned away again.

Malone was tall and burly, and he managed to somehow take up the entire corner of whatever room he was in. His hair was dark, but cropped so close to his head that he was practically bald. He had a dark, intense stare, and definitely looked the part of a thug who no one would want to mess with—an attribute that had come in handy more than once for Mervyn.

"Malone, how are you?" Mervyn asked pleasantly, unsurprised when Denzil sulkily threw himself in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the room from Malone. Callisto sat nearby, obviously curious about Malone.

"Can't complain," Malone said, glancing over at Denzil briefly and then offering Callisto a smile. "Yourself?"

"The same," Mervyn said, moving to help himself to some of the tea Evandie had set out. "You know Denzil, of course, but this is Callisto. He's Denzil's younger brother."

"A pleasure," Malone said gravely. "Though I do wish it was under other circumstances." Callisto just smiled briefly, looking tense. Denzil scowled at Malone, probably displeased Malone wasn't living up to obnoxious and a jerk like he'd claimed.

"Can we cut to the chase, please?" Denzil snapped, slumping further into his chair. Mervyn rolled his eyes, but nodded at Malone, sipping at his tea briefly to sooth his dry throat before setting it aside.

"I wish I had good news," Malone said slowly, pausing when Denzil snorted. He frowned, but continued after a second. "I was having no luck with your original query regarding the stolen heart. There have been a few other cases, similar in that the persons involved were missing their hearts, but those cases had stalled out and the investigators had no leads."

Mervyn hid a wince, watching Callisto. Malone was certainly softening his language, but he did know Callisto was the only living person who'd had their heart obviously stolen. Callisto hadn't moved, and his attentive, grave expression hadn't changed at all.

"You said were," Denzil said, scowling. "You *were* having no luck. What did you find out?"

Malone obviously hesitated, and Mervyn frowned, worried. If Malone was hesitating, whatever he'd found wasn't good. "How well do you know Baldric?" Malone asked slowly, and Mervyn grimaced, hoping that didn't mean what he thought it meant.

"Well enough, and you better have proof for what you're implying," Denzil snapped out, sitting up straight and glaring at Malone.

"Baldric Illini works at the local hospital—"

"I know that!" Denzil snapped, and Callisto flinched back, startled by Denzil's outburst. That seemed to recall Denzil some, and he slumped back in his seat unhappily.

"He works there as an assistant surgeon to Janan Fudoir," Malone finished. Mervyn winced, unable to help it. Janan Fudoir was a prominent wizard who worked mostly to heal the ailments of the rich in the city. He was notoriously finicky and would only work with other wizards, something Mervyn knew intimately, since Janan was his eldest brother and had picked up all of their parents' prejudices.

Denzil clenched his jaw, but otherwise didn't move. "What else?"

"I did some checking," Malone said, still obviously reluctant to share whatever he knew. "Since Baldric was the only wizard I knew to be in the area the evening your brother was attacked. I found links to five of the other six people who were found with no heart."

"And the sixth?" Denzil asked, calm as anything. Mervyn grimaced—Denzil was going to be a mess after this, not that Mervyn could blame him, if what Malone was insinuating was true.

"We don't know who he is, so we can't find a link to anything," Malone said, and he really was trying to break the news gently, but Denzil never took bad news well.

"Right," Denzil said, standing and storming from the salon. He slammed the door behind him, and a moment later a door slammed from somewhere deeper in the house.

Mervyn sighed, wondering how he was going to talk Denzil down from this. It had been bad enough when Denzil had found out Seth, his first beau in the city, had been a wizard. Add to that, the wizard he was seeing was very probably responsible for stealing Callisto's heart, and Mervyn wasn't sure there was anything he could say to make Denzil feel better.

"I'm going to—" Callisto began, standing and gesturing after Denzil. Mervyn nodded, frowning worriedly, but Callisto didn't look upset—worried, yes, but not like he was going to yell at Denzil for the entire mess.

"I'm sorry, Mervyn," Malone said gravely as the door shut behind Callisto. "I never seem to find good news for you or for Denzil."

"He will get over it," Mervyn said, though he wasn't so sure. Denzil had been holding a grudge against Malone for years now.

"Mmm," Malone said, obviously not believing a word of it. "Unfortunately, Baldric seems to have caught wind that someone is on to him. He's gone to ground—hasn't shown at the hospital or any of his usual haunts, and he's not staying at home. Either of them."

"Wonderful," Mervyn muttered, wondering what had spooked Baldric. Perhaps simply seeing Callisto after they'd replaced Baldric's draining heart charm. Though it still didn't make sense—why put the charm in Callisto but not in Denzil? "Do you know if Baldric did any casting at either of his residences?"

"Too small," Malone said confidently. "The one is a tiny apartment in the Halin district, probably a cover since it's not linked to the hospital in any way. The other is a fashionable villa near Cadill."

Which meant small and crowded close to the houses around it. Mervyn frowned thoughtfully. If Baldric didn't cast at either place, he had to have some other place to work—there was no way he'd be brazen enough to perform spells like the one he'd cast on Callisto at the hospital where anyone could see.

"Before you ask, I'm still checking into other places he may have set up shop. Unfortunately, he's not been stupid enough to leave his name anywhere but the apartment, his villa, and the hospital," Malone said, running a hand over his short-cropped hair distractedly. "It's strange, though. From what I've heard from his colleagues and acquaintances, Baldric didn't seem the type of wizard to be able to invent and pull off as complex a spell casting as would be necessary to replace a person's heart."

"Perhaps he hid it well?" Mervyn suggested, but then thought of the charm in his basement. "Though at that, I did note the charm he used was very well made, but the spell casting itself was sloppy and not at all thought through."

"Add to that, Callisto is the only person actually found with the device," Malone said grimly, glancing at the door Callisto had just left through. "The others just turned up, no heart, and usually missing for a few weeks."

"That's ... odd," Mervyn said, frowning. "Why let Callisto go with the charm? And where did he keep the other people in the time they were missing?"

"Good questions, all of them," Malone said. He fell silent, obviously lost in thought. Mervyn let him be, wondering how Denzil was faring. He was betting on 'not well,' though hopefully Callisto could calm him down some. Regardless, he'd have to find a way to keep Callisto and Denzil in the house; he didn't trust Baldric to not make some sort of play to get Denzil to meet him, at least, if not both Denzil and Callisto.

"I best be on my way," Malone finally said, standing and making the chair creak as he moved. "I'll keep looking for him and keep you updated if I find anything."

"Thank you," Mervyn said, standing as well to walk Malone to the door. "I'll keep a close watch on Denzil and Callisto until I hear from you."

"Good idea," Malone said, again running a hand over his head as they left the salon. "I don't trust this wizard, and I certainly don't trust Denzil to not do something stupid."

"Hopefully Callisto will ground him some," Mervyn said mildly, opening the front door for Malone. "Keep in touch and take care yourself. I don't doubt Baldric plays dirty."

"I will," Malone said simply, stepping out on the front porch. He squinted at the sun briefly before heading down the front walk with slow, ambling steps.

Mervyn waited until he'd reached the front gate before he shut the door. Frowning a moment at the empty foyer, he debated between going to find Callisto and Denzil and heading downstairs to reexamine Baldric's heart charm. After a moment, he headed downstairs—best to give the brothers some space, especially since Mervyn had been tangentially responsible for Denzil receiving the bad news.

Callisto shut the door to the salon quietly behind him, not giving himself a chance to think as he walked down the hallway. He hesitated briefly when he reached the library, but Denzil hadn't left the house, and Callisto couldn't see him retreating upstairs or down. That left the kitchen or the library, and as Evandie was always in the kitchen this time of day, Denzil had to be in the library.

He stopped outside the library door, shifting restlessly as he debated. He could leave Denzil alone; obviously Denzil didn't want to deal with any of it at the moment. Seeing Callisto would just hammer home what Baldrick had done—and what Baldrick had probably been planning to do to Denzil at some point.

On the other hand, Callisto wasn't sure Denzil *should* be left alone. He'd obviously been upset when he'd stormed out of the salon, and Denzil upset tended to do stupid things. Like storm off and confront a wizard who had no qualms about stealing people's hearts or killing them.

Callisto really had been incredibly lucky to find Mervyn.

Grimacing, Callisto reached up and touched the metal charm embedded in his chest. Even through two layers of fabric it was unyielding and foreign-feeling. It still made his chest ache dully most of the time, but it wasn't Denzil's fault it was there. Forcing himself to drop his hand, Callisto reached for the library doorknob.

It turned easily under his hand, thankfully, and Callisto let himself inside, shutting the door behind him. Denzil wasn't in immediate sight, so Callisto headed further into the massive room. He walked slowly, trying to be quiet, but Denzil wasn't in any of the little seating areas, and he wasn't in any of the rows of bookcases that filled the room.

Frowning, wondering if he'd guessed wrong, Callisto headed to the back of the library. He'd try the second floor—there was a little reading nook by a window up there—and then he'd check Denzil's room. Climbing the little wrought-iron staircase slowly, Callisto winced at the loud noises his footsteps made on the way up.

At first glance, the little reading nook was abandoned, but one chair had its back to the room, and as Callisto approached, he could make out Denzil's boots beneath the chair. He hesitated a second more, but then Callisto made himself walk over and sit in the other chair in the little nook.

It was a cute little area, with two overstuffed armchairs sitting at angles around a large window that overlooked the garden in the back of the house. There was a little table between the chairs that held a delicate-looking vase with a bouquet of dried flowers.

Denzil didn't look over when Callisto sat down, apparently absorbed in staring out the window. He was sitting slumped in the chair, so low that the chair's back extended a few inches above his head. He was scowling, but he wasn't crying, thankfully. Callisto wasn't sure what he'd do if Denzil were in tears.

Callisto fidgeted briefly, shifting restlessly in his seat. He still wasn't sure what to say, and having found Denzil hadn't inspired anything either. Maybe it would be easier if Denzil had acknowledged his presence, but he was still stalwartly refusing to do anything but stare out the window.

"You're not who I expected to follow," Denzil said, without so much as glancing at Callisto. "Usually it's Mervyn."

"I'm not usually here?" Callisto offered quietly, wondering how often Denzil stormed off like this. Probably fairly often—it had been his favorite way of dealing with arguments with their parents, and there had been a lot of those.

"Well, you can go away now," Denzil said, not meanly, but Callisto winced a little anyway. "I'm fine, and I don't need coddling. This isn't the first time—" Denzil cut off, finally looking at Callisto. He still didn't look happy, but Callisto really couldn't blame him.

"Okay," Callisto said, not wanting to intrude if Denzil truly wanted to be alone. "But—you know it's not your fault, right? Just like it's not mine."

Denzil snorted, shaking his head and looking away again. "It's not the same at all, Callisto. If not for me, you never would have met Baldric, and you never would've been alone for him to attack you."

"You cared about him," Callisto said slowly, hoping he wasn't making things worse. "You trusted him. He—when I saw you two together, he seemed like he cared about you, too."

"Obviously not," Denzil said tiredly, rubbing his forehead. "I should have just had him checked out to begin with. It was stupid of me to not, since everyone and their mother have bets on whether I'm a fairy."

"I wouldn't have," Callisto said firmly. He frowned at Denzil, but Denzil was studying the floor intently now. "That seems a stupid way to start a relationship."

"And that stupid investigator seems to think anyone that I'm dating needs to be threatened," Denzil grumbled, sighing. "And it might not be good for relationships, but it is safer."

"Why does he threaten them?" Callisto asked, baffled. Malone hadn't seemed mean, and Mervyn obviously liked him and held him in high esteem.

"Because he thinks—because he's an idiot," Denzil decided on, scowling. Callisto blinked, wondering what Denzil wasn't telling him. He'd have to ask Mervyn later.

"Okay," Callisto said, pausing before adding, "I don't blame you for any of this. I mean, you didn't want it to happen, and it—everything you did made sense. Especially since you knew there was someone out there after you."

"I was fool enough to play right into his hands. I didn't even think twice about it, but Baldric left not five minutes after you did that night," Denzil said, sounding bitter and unhappy. "If I had just paid more attention—"

"Denzil!" Callisto snapped, and getting annoyed at Denzil probably wasn't the best tactic for convincing Denzil that he didn't blame him for Baldric. "You trusted him, yes?"

"Yes, but—" Denzil began, frowning, but Callisto cut him off again.

"And you thought I'd be safer away from you?"

"Yes," Denzil said, obviously exasperated. "Still, that—"

"And you've done everything you possibly could to make this—" Callisto touched the heart charm lightly, "—work the best that it possibly could?"

"Mervyn—"

"You helped, every way you could," Callisto said heatedly, scowling fiercely at Denzil. "You don't get to brush it off and say it's all your fault when it's not, not at all. You could've had Baldric checked out, I could have ignored you and stuck with you that night. You didn't do anything but trust your lover, like you're supposed to. It's not your fault that Baldric turned out to be unworthy of that. It's *his* fault this happened, not yours and not mine."

"Okay," Denzil said, staring at him wide-eyed. Callisto flushed and sat back in his seat, wondering when he'd leaned forward. "I'm still going to help find him and your real heart."

"You're not leaving this house," Callisto said sharply, glaring at Denzil. He didn't really think Callisto was going to let him get away with that, did he? "If he went after me, it was probably because he wanted some confirmation that you could be a fairy."

"Except that's no guarantee," Denzil said, shaking his head. "You could be, when it skips me."

"It's still a pretty good indicator," Callisto said, shrugging. "Why else would he try for me and not you?"

"I don't know," Denzil said, looking thoughtful briefly before his expression cleared. "Anyway, how are you feeling? Is the heart charm still working well?"

"It is," Callisto said, stifling a sigh and wondering how many more times he'd have to answer that question.

"And the modifications Mervyn made?" Denzil asked, and Callisto blinked, flushing a little when he recalled *how* Mervyn had integrated the supplementary spells into his charm.

"They're good," Callisto said belatedly, flushing deeper when Denzil just smirked.

"I think I'm going to have to have a talk with Mervyn," Denzil said, grinning. Callisto shook his head, pleased to see the smile, but not so pleased that he had to suffer for it.

"No, you really don't," Callisto said, rolling his eyes. "It was just spell casting, honestly."

"I'll say some spells were being cast," Denzil said, raising his eyebrows suggestively. "Do you two need a chaperone?"

"Definitely no," Callisto said firmly. "Besides, he's just—he likes the casting is all. I don't think he's interested past that."

Denzil snorted. "You don't know him like I do. He doesn't ever do casting upstairs, and certainly not as familiarly as he was with you."

"How else was he supposed to do it?" Callisto asked, baffled. "It's embedded in my chest."

Denzil just shook his head, still smirking. "Sure, that was the only way to do that. Anyway, I think I'm going to retreat to my room before Mervyn comes along and tries to make me feel better, too."

"I hope you do," Callisto said awkwardly. "Feel better, that is."

"Sort of," Denzil said dismissively. "Probably as good as I'm going to get for the moment."

"Okay," Callisto said, wishing he could do better than that, but he'd take it for now.

"If Mervyn shows up, tell him I'm taking a nap," Denzil said, standing. "That should give me some space for a bit."

"I will," Callisto said, and Denzil nodded agreeably before heading to the second floor entrance to the library. Callisto watched him go, frowning a little. Hopefully Denzil wouldn't go right back to brooding, but there was little Callisto could do about it if he did.

Callisto waited until the door shut behind Denzil to stand. He could go see if Mervyn and Malone were still conversing in the salon, but he didn't really want to know more about the things Baldric had done. He did want to know if Malone had any ideas where his heart could be, but if it was bad news, as Callisto suspected, he'd rather not know just yet.

Heading down to the first floor of the library, Callisto meandered through the rows of books slowly. The library was going to be one of the things he missed most when it finally came time for him to leave. Though he still wasn't sure where he'd go, since he really, really couldn't go home with a wizard's charm in his chest.

Frowning at the bookcase in front of him, Callisto sighed. He could worry about it later. Denzil would help him get settled, at the very least, and Mervyn so far didn't seem to mind housing them. The rest could be worked out after they caught Baldric and learned the fate of Callisto's heart.

Snagging a few random books, Callisto headed to his usual reading spot on the sofa near the fireplace. Settling, he cracked open the first book and started to read the short stories it contained. He was only a few short stories into the book when the library door opened and Mervyn let himself in. He looked distracted and only smiled briefly at Callisto before disappearing between a pair of bookcases that Callisto mostly ignored, as they were full of anatomy and magic books.

Callisto fidgeted briefly with his book, wondering if Mervyn would disappear as quietly as he'd appeared, or if he'd come and chat for a few minutes. Not that it mattered either way; Callisto was just reading and

Mervyn had obviously only turned up because he needed or wanted books of his own. It was a library after all.

Callisto dropped his gaze, forcing himself to focus on the pages in front of him. It didn't work particularly well; he kept re-reading words only to realize he hadn't actually absorbed what they said. He gave up and was about to shut the book when Mervyn reappeared, carrying three thick tomes that looked incredibly intimidating.

He smiled, much more focused as he approached the seating area where Callisto was settled. "Mind if I join you?" Mervyn asked when he got close enough. "I have some research to do, and books I take downstairs tend to stay down there, much to Evandie's displeasure."

"No, go ahead," Callisto said, and he really wished Denzil had kept his mouth shut. Sitting up, he neatenened the little pile of books he'd pulled from the bookcases, fidgeting with them for a moment as Mervyn sat down in a nearby chair.

Part Seven

"How is Denzil doing?" Mervyn asked, setting his books aside. They were all anatomical reference books, if the titles were anything to go by, and Callisto wondered what Mervyn was working on.

"He's doing okay. Not great, and I think he's still pretty upset..." Callisto trailed off, shrugging. "I don't think there's anything but time that will help now."

"Probably not," Mervyn agreed, looking pensive. "Denzil likes to mope, but he's pretty resilient. A few weeks, and he'll bounce back."

"I hope so," Callisto said, hesitating before continuing, "Did Malone find Baldric?"

"No, unfortunately," Mervyn said, frowning even more. "He's disappeared, and Malone isn't even sure where he does his charm work, as he definitely doesn't do it at his residences."

"Could it be somewhere near where he grabbed me?" Callisto asked, fidgeting with the book in his lap. "He probably couldn't take me too far, right?"

"Not without attracting attention," Mervyn said thoughtfully, smiling at Callisto. "That's a good idea. I'll suggest it to Malone so he can concentrate his search there. And you know, it really is a good bet that he still has your heart and is keeping it alive, since he knew where you were the entire time. I can't believe his visit the other day was a coincidence, either."

"Oh," Callisto said, startled. He hadn't thought of that. "He'd keep it alive?"

"Probably, especially if he thought he could get another chance to put one of his charms in you, or as a bargaining chip when we do track him down," Mervyn said, shrugging. "It makes more sense than just letting it die."

"Oh," Callisto repeated, curling his fingers around the edges of his book to keep from touching the charm in his chest.

"In any case, there's nothing to do about it until Malone finds him," Mervyn said, tapping his fingers against the cover of his top-most reference book and looking pensive.

Callisto nodded, hesitating for a minute before asking, "What are you researching?"

"Hmm? Oh, just some more tweaks for your heart charm. Now that you're stable and can do some minor exertion—like climbing stairs—I'm going to focus on rounding out the other ways your heart rate would increase," Mervyn said. "Even if we get your heart back and get you all fixed up, this can go a long way for other people who need new hearts for whatever reason."

"Do you think you'll get... clients who will need new hearts?" Callisto asked curiously, wondering what Mervyn's typical customers were like. Surely not everything Mervyn did was as dramatic and drastic as replacing hearts.

"It's possible," Mervyn said, shrugging. "I get a lot of different problems thrown at me. But more likely I'll write up a report on the charm I created for you so other wizards can use it if they need to. Leaving out any reference to why you needed it, of course, and the other adaptations Baldric has included in his charm."

Callisto nodded, unable to keep himself from lightly touching the metal charm beneath his shirt. "How did Baldric know how to do the energy part? That's not—that's not common knowledge, right?"

"It's not, and I have no idea," Mervyn said, then cracked a slightly crooked smile. "I have a few theories, and there are some things that support them, but I'm hoping Baldric will be forthcoming about that and some of the other details of the charm when we do find him."

Callisto nodded, lapsing into silence. It was probably sad—he wanted Malone to find Baldric so he could know for sure what the fate of his heart was, but he also was more than content with staying there, reading and spending time with Denzil and Mervyn.

"So what are you reading?" Mervyn asked, drawing Callisto's attention again.

"Short stories," Callisto said, offering a smile as he displayed the cover of the book. Mervyn nodded, shifting his chair closer to where Callisto sat to get a better look at the book.

"I think I remember that one," Mervyn said thoughtfully, squinting at the cover before sitting up and patting his pockets. He pulled out his spectacles and peered at the book again, then shook his head. "No, that's one of Evandie's. She's bought half the books in here, if not more. Have you found a favorite book yet?"

Callisto nodded, leaning forward and pulling the book of paintings from the stack of books in front of him. He handed it off to Mervyn and tried to ignore the stupid butterflies in his stomach. It was just a book, after all, and it wouldn't be like Mervyn to make fun of him for it, as Denzil would have.

"Oh, this one I remember," Mervyn said, smiling at the book. "Do you know Kaplir? Or do you just like the paintings?"

"Just the paintings," Callisto admitted, flushing a little. "They're all so good. I can't—" Callisto cut off, his face getting warmer because his silly efforts were nothing compared to the paintings in the book.

"Oh, you paint," Mervyn said, smiling brightly. "Art was never a strong point of mine, much to the dismay of my teachers."

"Drawing charms?" Callisto guessed, recalling Mervyn's less-than-perfect drawing of the heart charm.

"Yes," Mervyn said, grinning sheepishly. "The spell work is easy. Diagramming a charm is the difficult part."

"Have you considered teaching?" Callisto asked curiously, because it seemed Mervyn would be good at that, as patient as he was. "You're good at explaining things."

"I've thought about it," Mervyn said, shrugging. "But I like what I do now, and teaching would curtail the amount of time I have to work with people." Callisto nodded. That made sense, given what he knew of Mervyn. Mervyn really did seem to like helping people, without caring about the things most wizards did. Namely, wealth and as much magical power as they could get their hands on. "You nearly made me forget," Mervyn said, tapping the cover of the book of paintings. "I was going to offer—would you like me to translate? So you can know what the paintings are?"

"Oh, um, sure," Callisto said, startled. Could Mervyn do that? Callisto had never heard of a charm that could translate books—there were a few speaking charm he'd heard of that could translate, but he'd only heard of them because of the incidents that had been caused by their poor translations.

"All right, then," Mervyn said thoughtfully, setting aside his reference books and standing. Callisto blinked, perplexed as Mervyn joined him on the sofa, sitting a little closer than was polite. Callisto's cheeks warmed again, but he ignored it. Surely Mervyn didn't mean anything by it, except Denzil had said—

"So if my admittedly rusty Kaplir is correct, the title simply means *A Century of Art: The Transformative Works*," Mervyn said, running his fingers over the letters on the cover of the book. Callisto laughed, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry. I thought you had a charm—" Callisto began, flushing deeper when Mervyn just smiled at him. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," Mervyn assured him, cracking open the book and flipping through the first few pages until he reached the first painting. "*The shoreline at Derya* by Kaimana Dunbar. Apparently he's a big deal, won Kaplir's highest art award for this?"

"Never heard of him," Callisto said, though that was no surprise. He didn't know anything about art, really, not when it came to the most famous paintings and artists.

"Me either," Mervyn confided then looked thoughtful. "Evandie might. She's forever scolding me for not paying attention to cultural things like art and *theatre*." Mervyn wrinkled his nose at the last word, saying it with such distaste that Callisto couldn't help but laugh again.

"I like the paintings," Callisto said slowly, shrugging. His shoulder brushed Mervyn's lightly, but he ignored that, focusing on the book. "But I don't know that I care too much who did them or what awards they've won. That doesn't have much to do with the image."

"True," Mervyn said, squinting at the book again. "Apparently this particular beach was once the scene for an epic battle. One that we only narrowly won."

"It looks peaceful," Callisto said, wondering just how stupid he sounded. But Mervyn just nodded, and then voiced the rest of Callisto's thought.

"Perhaps he painted it as a contrast to that?"

"Maybe," Callisto said, staring at the painting for a moment longer before asking, "Does it say anything else?"

"No," Mervyn said, flipping to the next painting and translating the artist and the description of the scene. They'd only gone through a few dozen paintings when the sound of someone clearing their throat made Callisto jump. He knocked elbows with Mervyn, and his face immediately heated even as he wondered when Mervyn had gotten so close—or when he'd gotten so close to Mervyn.

"Dinner will be ready in ten minutes," Evandie said stiffly, giving them a suspicious look that just made Callisto blush all the more. Which was stupid—it wasn't as though he and Mervyn were doing anything other than reading.

"Thank you, Evandie," Mervyn said, not moving away from Callisto at all. "In the dining room tonight?"

"Yes," Evandie said, then glanced at the books Mervyn had abandoned on the other chair. "Leave those there. You can come back to them later."

"I was planning to," Mervyn said easily, taking no offense to Evandie's imperious tone. Callisto wondered curiously what Evandie's story was, since she obviously wasn't simply a servant. "Can you go see if Denzil is up to joining us? He should be moping in his room." Evandie simply nodded, looking briefly annoyed at mention of Denzil before turning and leaving the library.

"She's not a servant, not really?" Callisto asked shyly, not sure if he was overstepping his bounds. Mervyn would not answer if he was, though. Mervyn shook his head, pulling a scrap of ribbon from his pocket and marking their place in the book.

"No, Evandie is... technically she works as the housekeeper, but she's also my great-aunt. My parents supported her after my great-uncle died." Mervyn paused, setting the book of paintings down on the table. "Then I had a falling out with my parents, and she supported me in my arguments. They kicked her out when they kicked me out. Evandie wouldn't hear of me wasting money on a real servant when I moved here, and she's too proud to simply let me support her, so she does the housekeeping for me. In recompense, she gets to spend my money any way she likes, and I make her spoil herself every so often."

"Oh," Callisto said, startled. Mervyn had never spoken of his family before, but he certainly didn't seem the type to have been disowned. He was too nice for that.

"It was over the work I do, actually," Mervyn said, apparently reading Callisto's thoughts.

"You don't have to tell me," Callisto said quickly. Mervyn shrugged then stood, pushing his hair out of his face. He didn't look upset, though obviously the subject wasn't a happy one.

"I don't mind. It's no big secret," Mervyn said, and he smiled a little. "Come on, Evandie will be annoyed if we let dinner get cold."

"Right," Callisto said, standing quickly and nearly tripping in his haste. Mervyn caught his arm, steadying him, and Callisto gave him a brief smile.

"They wanted me to stay working at the hospital as a magical surgeon there," Mervyn said, slowly letting go of Callisto's arm. It's a guaranteed way to earn a lot of money and not have to work very hard. I think they were counting on me to provide a lush lifestyle than that which they were living."

"But you didn't want to," Callisto said, which made sense. Mervyn obviously liked to be hands-on with his magic and spend lots of time working out all the kinks and bugs.

"No," Mervyn said, frowning as he led the way out of the library. "The hospital is well and good if you have a lot of money or prestige, but no one there gives any care for any of the patients, no matter how serious their condition."

"Oh," Callisto said quietly, distracted as they stepped out into the hallway. He'd been trying to find the hospital when he'd stumbled across Mervyn's house. He really was very lucky he'd found Mervyn first.

"It really isn't a big deal," Mervyn said, placing a hand against Callisto's back and steering him gently towards the dining room. "It sounds more dramatic than it actually is. I was already moved out and living here; only Evandie had to move. "

"Still," Callisto said, making a face. "Having—being disowned isn't—I'd be upset, even if I didn't live with my parents." Callisto bit his lip, trying to not think about how likely it was that his parents were going to disown him. Even if he got his real heart back, there was no saying they wouldn't eventually find out anyway.

"It was—I wasn't very close to my parents to begin with," Mervyn said, shrugging. His hand fell away as they reached the dining room, and Callisto stupidly felt a little disappointed that Mervyn was no longer touching him. The dining room was lovely, with pretty teak furniture and a dark, tiled floor. Two tall windows stretched the length of the far wall, the draperies pulled back to let in the evening light.

"I have three older siblings, but I was born almost ten years after my parents had my sister. I think they were sick of children at that point," Mervyn said, his tone light. Callisto frowned, not completely convinced that Mervyn was as reconciled to it as he was trying to pretend.

"That's terrible," Callisto said, ignoring that he was pretty sure his parents had only had children so they could have help on the orchard.

"It is what it is," Mervyn said, shrugging. "I'm sorry I brought up such an unpleasant subject."

"I asked," Callisto pointed out, sitting down and wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. Except he was glad he knew—it was nice to know more about how Mervyn had come to be where he was, doing what he did.

"You did, but I could have left it," Mervyn said, shrugging as he took the seat closest to Callisto. "Can I ask how you're feeling or will you throw something at me?"

"You can ask. I won't throw anything," Callisto said, smiling despite himself. He paused then added, "This time."

Mervyn laughed, pouring them both wine from the bottle perspiring in the center of the table. "I'll keep that in mind. So how are you feeling?"

"Good," Callisto said, touching the charm again. He couldn't seem to stop whenever he thought about it. And it was still strange, having a chunk of metal in his chest, but Mervyn's charm was much easier to forget about when he wasn't thinking about it. The weight of it didn't drag on him the way Baldric's charm had. "I still get tired more quickly than I used to, but that's, um, over the course of the day?"

Mervyn nodded, looking thoughtful. "So no single activity makes you tired?" Callisto nodded, shifting in his seat anxiously. He almost thought it was stupid to mention—he was probably just being finicky, and there was nothing wrong with the charm. Still, it was better to mention to Mervyn now, in case it became more pronounced later.

"It's probably a combination of things," Mervyn said slowly, sipping his wine before setting the glass back down on the table. "The surgery wasn't that long ago, so your body is probably still recovering from that, as well as adjusting to having such a strange replacement for a heart. Also, there are still tweaks I have to make—more indicators to add. Since your heart doesn't always know to increase or decrease its output, that puts more strain on your body, and it's probably subtle enough you don't notice until the end of the day."

"That makes sense," Callisto said, slumping a little. He should have thought of both of those, but it honestly felt as if he'd had the charm for longer than he actually had.

"I'll try to get the rest of the kinks ironed out quickly," Mervyn promised, smiling sympathetically. "I know it can't be easy dealing with all of this."

"It's not bad," Callisto said, since it really wasn't anymore. "It's much better, I just thought—you should know? In case it was something worse."

"Still, I'm sure you'd rather the tweaking be done," Mervyn said, smiling slowly in a way that made Callisto recall the way Mervyn had cast the last modifications to his charm.

Flushing, Callisto shrugged and picked up his wine glass, taking a sip to try and hide his fluster. It was a red wine, and to Callisto's admittedly inexperienced tastes, not very good. The only wine he usually drank was the apple and other fruit-based wines his parents made.

"So you do think Denzil will be okay?" Callisto asked, changing the subject as he set the wine down and resolve to drink no more of it.

"It will take a bit, but yes," Mervyn said confidently, and he would know better than Callisto, since he'd been around Denzil more, and more recently. "You should probably let him do something for you, to 'make up for it' in his mind."

"He's not allowed to leave the house," Callisto said, more fiercely than he'd meant. Mervyn was nodding though, so at least he wasn't alone in that sentiment.

"If he leaves, it will be to try and track Baldric down," Mervyn said, making a face. "Denzil is very hot-headed, and he's good at magic, but not good enough to go head-to-head with a wizard."

"He'd better not try," Callisto said, scowling briefly. If he had to lock Denzil in his bedroom, he would. "We should tell him Baldric isn't where he usually is. That might keep him from rushing out to find him."

"He might have some idea where Baldric is," Mervyn said, not appearing phased by Callisto's vehemence. "I'll speak to him tomorrow, though I'm sure he'll do his best to avoid me."

"I can go with you? He's not trying to avoid me," Callisto suggested, wondering why Denzil didn't just talk to Mervyn. He doubted that Mervyn would be anything but understanding—he didn't seem the type to rub things in and gloat and say 'I told you so.'

"Maybe," Mervyn said, shrugging. "He might be more willing to talk about Baldric without you there, however. He's very protective." Callisto shrugged, not sure what to say to that. Denzil had been protective, and it was a little strange, since Denzil had wanted nothing to do with him when they were growing up. "And we're talking about unhappy things again," Mervyn said, smiling wryly. "I'm sorry. I can't seem to help myself."

"It's okay," Callisto said, shrugging. "I'm not doing much better. Um, oh," Callisto paused, smiling shyly. "Would you like to hear some embarrassing stories about Denzil?"

Mervyn laughed, smiling brightly. "I'd love to."

"Okay," Callisto said, pausing to think. Denzil was going to kill him for this, but that was what he got for avoiding Mervyn. "Um, so every year my parents host a big bonfire to clear dead brush and downed tree limbs. They also sell fruit and the ciders and wines and other things they make from the orchard. They didn't let us help or get too close to the bonfire until we were pretty old, worried we'd set ourselves on fire or something."

Mervyn laughed again, shaking his head. "I think I can see where this is going."

"Right, so, one year, they finally decide Denzil is old enough, partly because he kept nagging them to let him help," Callisto said, smiling as he remembered. Denzil had been excited enough he hadn't even tried to rub it in Callisto's face. "Denzil was really excited at first, but our parents, they like to nag and nitpick. I think they told him twenty times not to get too close to the fire, and they didn't let him add wood, just bring it to them. Denzil wasn't happy, of course, and decided he'd add the next batch of wood himself. Our parents weren't pleased, but when Denzil gets it in his head to do something..."

"There really is no dissuading him," Mervyn finished dryly. "I've run into that stubborn streak more than once."

Callisto nodded, unsurprised. "So he's going to add the wood, and our mother is still saying, 'don't get too close, don't get too close,' and so Denzil gets as close as he can, throws the wood on, and turns to

gloat that he was just fine—" Callisto paused, grinning, "—and a spark jumps out of the fire and sets his pants ablaze."

Mervyn laughed, shaking his head. "I bet he wasn't even repentant after, either."

"He did shriek like a little girl," Callisto said thoughtfully. "Though he denies it ever happened."

"I'm not surprised," Mervyn said, grinning cheerfully. "One of the first cases I had him help me with was this young fairy who was having trouble breathing. She was a street vendor, and while she was working she dressed like a man to keep harassment to a minimum. Her hair was cut short to help with the illusion, but it was obvious she was a woman."

"Denzil took one look, assumed she was a man, and called her 'him' and 'he' throughout the conversation, despite our attempts to subtly bring her gender to his attention. When I finally managed to tell him afterwards, he was incredibly annoyed with me, and then proceeded to pretend it didn't happen."

"I can see how he'd make that mistake," Callisto said, smiling wryly. "Our village is very old-fashioned, and I can't think of any women who have short hair. It isn't worth the gossip that would come with it. Still, Denzil likes to deal with his problems and any embarrassing situations he gets himself into by pretending it never happened. He's very good at it. There was this one time—" Callisto cut off as the door opened and Evandie appeared, bearing a tray of steaming plates.

"Denzil said to inform you that he's still asleep," Evandie said flatly, obviously unimpressed by Denzil's request.

"Still avoiding me, I see," Mervyn said lightly, though Callisto thought he could hear an undercurrent of frustration in Mervyn's voice.

"He'll probably come out tomorrow," Callisto offered, giving Evandie a smile and saying "thank you" when she set a plate in front of him.

"You're welcome," Evandie said, her pinched, annoyed expression fading. She set the other plate in front of Mervyn then gave Callisto an assessing look. She sniffed then declared, "At least this one has manners."

Callisto blinked, startled, but Mervyn just laughed, shaking his head. "Thank you, Evandie. Make sure Denzil gets something to eat, too, please? Even though he's rude?"

"He'll get something," Evandie muttered, then promptly bustled from the room. Callisto blinked after her then turned back to Mervyn, who just smiled as though nothing strange had happened.

"So you were saying? About Denzil?" Mervyn prompted, and Callisto wondered why he felt like he was being distracted. Deciding it didn't matter, Callisto started his story again, focusing on enjoying his food and Mervyn's company and nothing else.

Part Eight

Mervyn climbed the stairs to the second floor of the house slowly, delaying as much as he could get away with. He really didn't want to have the conversation he was about to have with Denzil. Denzil would be defensive and snappy, and he wouldn't really listen to anything Mervyn said, more so because he probably well and truly blamed himself for what Baldric had done to Callisto, no matter what Callisto had told him.

Denzil had managed to void him an entire two days, and Mervyn was sick of it. Reaching the top of the stairs, he turned and headed down the hall to Denzil's room. He had it on Evandie and Callisto's authority that Denzil was still here and that he hadn't tried to leave, so that was something at least.

Mervyn paused outside the door to Denzil's bedroom, waiting half a second before knocking loudly. Something went *thump* inside, but nothing happened past that. Likely Denzil hoped ignoring him would work well enough to drive him away.

Giving Denzil another minute to answer the door, Mervyn shifted impatiently then pulled his lock-pick charm from his pocket. He tried the knob first and was surprised when it turned easily under his hand. Shrugging it off, Mervyn tucked the charm away and let himself into Denzil's room.

"Go away, Mervyn," Denzil said immediately, not looking up from the book he was pretending to read. "I don't want a pep talk."

"Good, I'm not here to give one," Mervyn replied, shutting the door behind him. Denzil was sitting in the window seat this room boasted, and so Mervyn dragged a chair close and sat down. "Callisto is worried about you," Mervyn said, not at all above playing dirty. Denzil sighed, snapping his book shut.

"Really, Mervyn, you have to bring Callisto into this?" Denzil snapped, scowling at him.

"I'm worried, too, but you usually don't care about my feelings," Mervyn said, smiling crookedly. Denzil scoffed loudly, sitting up straight in the window seat.

"What do you want me to say, Mervyn? I was wrong, I was reckless, I was stupid? Fine, all of the above," Denzil bit out. "You were right, I should have gotten him checked out. I shouldn't have simply trusted him. I should have seen the signs something was wrong, and I willfully ignored it all to—to prove I wasn't stupid, and Callisto paid the price for it."

"He doesn't blame you, Denzil," Mervyn said gently. "He's not mad at you or upset at anything other than you beating yourself up over this."

"For now," Denzil said bitterly. "What happens if we can't find Baldric? Or if his heart is dead or charmed and he has to live with a chunk of metal in his chest for the rest of his life?"

"Callisto is smarter than that," Mervyn said, firmly believing it. "And the charm is a near-perfect replacement. A few tweaks, and it will be perfect."

"Our parents will disavow any knowledge of him if he goes home with a wizard charm in his chest," Denzil said, shaking his head. "Even if we get his heart back, there's no guarantee we can replace it properly and that he can do everything he did before. There's just—there's no way he's going to be able to go back to the orchard like he wants."

"Are you sure that's what he wants?" Mervyn asked quietly, frowning at Denzil thoughtfully. "He's never made it sound like he was happy there." Denzil just shrugged, staring pensively at the wall above Mervyn's head. "Malone and I shouldn't have pushed you the way we did," Mervyn said after a moment. "I, at least, know you well enough to know how stubborn you can be when you're pushed. I only did it because I can't always be there to protect you, and I saw what Seth did to you. I didn't want to see that happen again."

"I know, and I should have been smart enough..." Denzil sighed, running a hand through his hair restlessly. "I just thought that it didn't matter, that if anything went wrong, it would be my decision and that my stupidity wouldn't hurt anyone else."

"It was a fluke," Mervyn said, shaking his head a little. "Just like Callisto finding my place and deciding to try me instead of the hospital."

Denzil winced, making a face. "He was really trying for the hospital?"

"I warned him," Mervyn said, frowning. "And Denzil, you know I'd be seriously upset if anything happened to you, right? You shouldn't be so cavalier—"

"I know, I know," Denzil cut him off, looking annoyed briefly. "I was mostly thinking of that bastard Malone."

Mervyn shook his head, somehow unsurprised. Denzil really needed to either accept that Malone was a wizard and get over it or actually get over Malone. Not that Denzil would admit his interest, not anymore. "Can you stop avoiding me now, then?" Mervyn asked, propping his feet up on the edge of the window seat, near Denzil's legs. "I'm not going to yell at you or tell you, 'I told you so,' and Callisto really is worried."

"He shouldn't be," Denzil grumbled, eyeing Mervyn's feet but ultimately ignoring them. "He talked to me the other day."

"I think it's because he hasn't seen you since," Mervyn pointed out, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Denzil muttered, glancing out the window. "So have you heard anything else from Malone?"

"Not yet," Mervyn said, frowning, but deciding to let Denzil change the subject. "He should turn up in a day or so to let me know how it's going. Sooner, if he manages to find Baldric."

"Disappeared?" Denzil asked, though he made more of a statement of it. "What do you think tipped him? We didn't know until after he stopped by that he was behind it."

"It could be just that he saw Callisto," Mervyn said, wishing there was something more he could do to help Denzil work out his issues with Baldric, aside from distracting him. "I'm not sure. We may have accidentally suggested we knew, but I don't see how."

"He was always kind of high strung," Denzil muttered, making Mervyn strain to pick out what he was saying. "It wouldn't take much to spook him."

"Mmm," Mervyn said, wondering why Denzil had been seeing Baldric, then. He rarely had patience for that sort of behavior. "Any ideas where he might be hiding? Malone said he's no longer at his residences, and he's not showing up for work."

"No," Denzil said, shaking his head. He smiled, not at all a happy expression. "I didn't know he had more than once residence, or that he was a wizard, and he was obviously keeping it from me on purpose. Why would I have any idea where he does his spell casting?"

"He might have insisted on meeting frequently in a particular area of the city that wasn't near the hospital or his apartment," Mervyn suggested, wondering if it would help to shake some sense into Denzil. Probably not, that usually just annoyed Denzil. "Callisto suggested it might be near where Baldric attacked him, since it would be difficult to get him too far without attracting notice."

"Yeah, maybe," Denzil said, shrugging. Mervyn sighed, giving up on that line of questioning—Denzil was obviously in no mood for it. "I could write him a note, maybe. Tell him Callisto's doing better and you won't stop pestering me about inviting him for dinner. Maybe it will draw him back out or at least lull him into making a mistake."

"That's a good idea," Mervyn said cautiously, though he wasn't so sure Denzil could write such a note without some emotion leaking in.

"I'll do it in a bit, then," Denzil said, frowning morosely. "After I go reassure Callisto I'm not dead."

"Which you should do now," Mervyn said, making Denzil roll his eyes. "He should be in the library. That's where he usually is this time of day."

"You know his schedule?" Denzil asked, and he perked right up, meaning that Mervyn had just inadvertently let something slip.

"Considering he only leaves the library to eat and sleep, it's not really hard to figure out," Mervyn said dryly, hoping to head Denzil off. He doubted he'd be that lucky though; Denzil liked distractions when he was upset, and this was too easy for him to pass up.

"Uh-huh," Denzil said, obviously not impressed or at all dissuaded. "Which is why you were practically in his lap the last time you modified his charm?"

"It was the easiest way to do it," Mervyn said, refusing to be ruffled. He shrugged, but couldn't resist adding, "Callisto didn't seem to mind."

"All right, then," Denzil said, raising his eyebrows at Mervyn. "What are your intentions with regards to my brother, Mervyn? Do I have to step up and defend his honor? I think I need to start chaperoning you two."

"He is an adult, Denzil," Mervyn said, amused even as he avoided Denzil's questions. He wasn't sure what his intentions were, yet, but he did know that he wasn't going to do anything until the matter of Callisto's heart was completely resolved. And perhaps not even then—he didn't want a 'thank you' relationship.

"Barely," Denzil said, snorting. "He's only twenty."

"Twenty is two years an adult," Mervyn said, almost laughing at the petulant look on Denzil's face.

"He's young and, worse, impressionable. Don't mess with him, Mervyn," Denzil warned, serious again.

"I wouldn't do that," Mervyn said, a little hurt even though he understood where Denzil was coming from. "Nothing is going to happen until he has his heart back or the charm is perfect, and I won't do anything if I think he's just infatuated because I helped him."

"Okay," Denzil said, shifting guiltily. He didn't apologize, though Mervyn had not really expected him to. "Good. Um, I was thinking it might be nice to get him something to distract him from the whole mess. Only, Callisto would kill me if I went out alone..."

"What did you have in mind?" Mervyn asked, a little surprised that Denzil was acceding to Callisto on the matter of staying here.

"Paints or something," Denzil said, making a face. "I don't know what exactly he'd need, but he likes to do that sort of thing."

"I'll put Evandie on it," Mervyn said. It was a good idea; no doubt Callisto wouldn't mind having another source of distraction besides the library. "She can figure out what to get without asking Callisto, so it will be a surprise."

"Good," Denzil said, grinning briefly. "You can even say it's partly from you, get some points with Callisto for figuring out what he likes."

"He already told me he likes painting," Mervyn said, then wished he'd kept that to himself when Denzil raised his eyebrows.

"Really," Denzil drawled, smirking obnoxiously. "Callisto never talks about his art."

"It came up," Mervyn said, shrugging. Denzil didn't need to know about the time he and Callisto had spent together in the library discussing the paintings in the Kaplir book. "Nothing special about it."

"He doesn't talk about it, at all," Denzil stressed, looking thoughtful and much less obnoxious for it. "Our parents think it's rubbish and do everything they can to discourage it. They want him to take over the orchard or something. Apparently I'm too flighty."

"You are flighty," Mervyn said dryly, and Denzil rolled his eyes.

"Anyway," Denzil said loudly. "He must trust you a lot, to admit it."

"Good," Mervyn said, because Callisto really should trust him at this point. "Is that why he thinks he needs to go home? So he can take over the orchards?"

"Probably something like that," Denzil muttered, looking annoyed. "Callisto has always ceded to our parents' demands a lot more than I did. He probably feels responsible for them somehow, when it's their own damn fault I left. They're probably going to disown him for this mess, never mind it's not his fault, and then they'll start in on guilt-tripping me to come home, regardless of the way we always fight and I never do what they want."

"I hope Callisto isn't too upset when your parents find out," Mervyn said quietly, wanting to find the idiots and shake them, and not for the first time. Denzil had mentioned them before, usually only briefly, but never in a good way.

"Nothing to do for it," Denzil said dismissively. "Once we find Baldric, I need to see about finding him a place here, since going home isn't really an option for him."

"I can help with that, and he's welcome to stay here for as long as he needs to. He's a quiet guest," Mervyn said, even though he knew Denzil was going to take the offer in the wrong way.

"Uh-huh," Denzil said, rolling his eyes. "You're just being a good person, with no ulterior motives."

"Yes, Denzil," Mervyn said dryly. "I plan to sneak him into my room every night. You've uncovered my secret plans. I'll have to kill you now."

Denzil snorted, shaking his head. "You're not fooling me, and you'd better be nice to Callisto. If you upset him, I'll make your balls rot. Shalla taught me that trick last month."

"I'll keep it in mind," Mervyn said, making a face. "I should get back to work. I want to get as many modifications done as I can before Malone finds Baldric, just in case."

"Just in case, what?" Denzil asked suspiciously. "You're not letting Callisto go with you to get him."

"No, but in case anything happens to me, he'll have as complete a charm as possible," Mervyn said, standing up. "Not that I anticipate anything of that sort happening, but I'd also like it to be a complete replacement for his sake."

"Right," Denzil said, not sounding very appeased by Mervyn's explanation. "Let me know if you need my help for anything. And tell Evandie to stop bringing me tea and bread and nothing else."

"Tell her yourself," Mervyn said, dragging his chair back to its proper spot in the room. "She's mad you missed dinner the other night. She set up the dining room for it."

"Ah," Denzil said, grimacing. "Maybe I'll just leave her be for now, then."

"Smart," Mervyn said. "Visit Callisto and prove you're not dead."

"Yes, yes," Denzil muttered. "Go on, stop nagging me."

"Steal all my fun," Mervyn said lightly, but obligingly headed for the door. He'd stop and visit with Evandie, give her the mission of finding painting supplies for Callisto, then head back to his work rooms to work on more modifications for the heart charm.

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Callisto sat as still as he could, listening to the soft murmur of Mervyn's voice as he spoke the spell words that would incorporate the latest changes into the charm. Mervyn was kneeling in front of him again, tucked neatly between Callisto's knees, with his arm stretched between them. Mervyn's hand was flat against the charm this time instead of just his fingertips touching it, though Callisto wasn't sure whether that was because it was more comfortable or if it was necessary for the spell casting.

Mervyn's voice was soothing, especially when he was casting. Calm and sure and strong and Callisto could listen to it all day, which was a stupid thing to think, even if it was better than worrying over when Malone would finally show back up and what news he would bring. Or worrying over Denzil, who seemed determined to pretend that he was perfectly fine despite Baldrick's betrayal.

Mervyn had been chanting for half an hour already, so he should be done soon if these modifications were anything like the last set. According to Mervyn, they were similar in that they monitored triggers to increase and decrease his blood flow, but different in the triggers that they monitored. It also wasn't the last set of modifications, and Callisto should probably be more upset about that.

Only, he liked it here. He liked Mervyn's library, and he didn't mind Denzil's being around, and he liked Evandie's brisk, no-nonsense way of taking care of things. And there was also Mervyn, and Callisto was pretty sure it was a bad idea to think about all the ways he liked Mervyn when Mervyn was kneeling between his legs.

Flushing, Callisto bit his lip briefly and tried not to pay too much attention to where Mervyn was. As though compelled by Callisto's thoughts, Mervyn's chanting suddenly slowed and then stopped. The charm modifications fell into place abruptly, like flipping a light switch, and Callisto blinked, aborting his automatic motion to touch the charm.

"How do you feel?" Mervyn asked, blinking owlishly up at Callisto. He'd forgotten to remove his spectacles, Callisto noted, then flushed because Mervyn had asked a question and Callisto wasn't paying him proper attention.

"Um, good, it's—" Callisto stumbled the words out then paused, actually taking a second to assess how the charm felt. "It's the same as before, when you had the intermediate charm."

"Good," Mervyn said, smiling. He absently removed his spectacles, setting them on the nearby table before gingerly climbing to his feet. "Only the more obscure triggers are left now, and you're not really likely to run into any situations where you set them off, so you should be fine until I can work them out."

"Okay," Callisto accepted, curious about what triggers were left, but Mervyn would have explained them if they were simple.

"What will you do, then?" Callisto asked as Mervyn swallowed a large gulp of by-now lukewarm tea. "I mean, when all the casting is done?"

Mervyn shrugged, sitting down heavily in the closest chair and stretching his legs out in front of him. "Write it all up, send it off to an old associate of mine whom I still trust, and then work on another problem."

"Like what?" Callisto pressed, knowing Mervyn wouldn't take offense to his curiosity. "What sort of thing do you usually work on?"

"Health magic is what I'm best at," Mervyn said, looking thoughtful. "But I like to dabble in other fields. I'm getting good at communication charms, and I like to play with fire spells, though I'm not very good at them yet. That's what I work on in between clients."

"Fire spells?" Callisto repeated. "Like... fire starting spells?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes other applications, like..." Mervyn trailed off, frowning in thought. "Like the warming charm I gave you. The base was a fire charm. Heavily modified, of course. The first few actually caught the test subjects on fire."

"You caught people on fire?" Callisto said, staring in disbelief at Mervyn. Surely not—Mervyn was more careful than that.

"Oh, no," Mervyn said cheerfully. "My first test subjects were inanimate. One of Evandie's tea towels, a napkin, and a blanket."

"Oh, good," Callisto said, smiling sheepishly. "I bet Evandie wasn't happy with you."

"Oh, she doesn't know. I never tell her when I steal things from upstairs for my experiments. I like to breathe," Mervyn said, grinning, and Callisto laughed, unable to not at the thought of Mervyn filching tea towels and the like out from under Evandie's nose.

"So what do you do when you're not working on your family's orchard? You like to paint, right?" Mervyn asked, looking genuinely interested. Callisto nodded—he had admitted that before, when Mervyn had translated the book of paintings for him.

"What do you like to paint?" Mervyn asked curiously, sitting up and tucking his legs under the chair he was sitting in. "I know the Kaplir book was mostly landscapes, but..."

"I like to paint people," Callisto said, and he usually preferred to not talk about his painting, but it was Mervyn. He was obviously interested, and he hadn't looked down on Callisto's interest in it previously.

"Portraits? Or—I don't know what they're called. Scenes, I suppose? Where people are doing something," Mervyn said, curious but not flippant like Denzil.

"Scenes," Callisto said, shrugging. "But portraits aren't bad. I just prefer people it makes it... seem more alive, I guess."

"I agree," Mervyn said, smiling as he glanced at the large painting above the mantle. It depicted a wintry forest and a frozen pond with a small cabin tucked off to one side, chimney smoking. "Evandie has different tastes, as you may have noticed." Callisto smiled, betting that Mervyn didn't put up a fuss because decorating the house made Evandie happy.

A knock on the library door interrupted whatever Mervyn had been about to say, and the door opened to admit Evandie, wearing a frilly apron covered in smears of flour. "Yes, Evandie?" Mervyn asked easily, not annoyed by the interruption.

"Your investigator friend is here," Evandie said stiffly. Callisto wondered if she disapproved of Malone or if she was just annoyed at being interrupted from whatever she'd been doing. "He's in the salon."

"Thank you, Evandie. Can you find Denzil and let him know? He should be hiding in his bedroom." Mervyn stood as he finished speaking, and Callisto hastily followed suit.

"Ready?" Mervyn asked gently, clasping Callisto's shoulder. Callisto nodded, smiling briefly at the touch. It seemed to reassure Mervyn, at least, as he dropped his hand and led the way to the salon.

Callisto spent the short walk trying to quell his anxiety, but to no avail. It was stupid, to get so worked up, not knowing what Malone had found—or not found, since he could certainly just be here to say he couldn't find anything and had run out of ideas.

Malone was just as large and solemn-looking as Callisto remembered. He stood when they entered, nodding in greeting to them both. He looked exhausted, Callisto noted, feeling guilty—surely Malone had other things he had to do as an Investigator aside from looking into finding Baldric. He'd have to find some way to thank Malone, as well as Mervyn. Maybe he could get Denzil to help him with that, since Denzil knew Malone well enough to dislike him.

Malone and Mervyn both sat down, and Callisto hesitated briefly, wondering what he'd missed, before hastily taking the seat next to Mervyn. Not half a second later, the door to the salon opened and Denzil slouched in, looking rather as if Evandie had woken him from a nap. His hair was shooting in a few different directions, his clothes were rumpled, and he looked decidedly sleepy when he glowered at Malone.

He wasn't too sleepy to smirk at Callisto, however—probably for his choice of seating—but Callisto just rolled his eyes and settled back more comfortably.

"Ah, Denzil, there you are," Mervyn said, smiling. "Did Evandie wake you? We can fill you in later if you'd like to finish your nap."

"Shut up," Denzil muttered, trying unsuccessfully to smooth down his hair. "What did you find, Malone?" Malone's eyebrows rose a fraction and Callisto smothered a smile. Denzil was probably too sleepy to properly remember how much he didn't like Malone.

"I found where he's hiding," Malone said without preamble. "I wasn't able to get inside, but I did confirm he's living there."

"Where?" Denzil half-asked, half-snapped, looking much more alert.

"A warehouse in the Padovan district," Malone said slowly. "It's one of a number in the area, so I was able to look at a nearby warehouse to get a sense of the layout. It should be pretty easy to navigate, provided he hasn't changed the interior much. It's about six blocks from where you were attacked." Malone looked at Callisto as he spoke, and Callisto nodded.

"What happens now?" Callisto asked quietly, folding his hands together to keep from fidgeting.

"I don't have enough evidence to arrest him," Malone said slowly, ignoring Denzil's scoff in favor of meeting Callisto's eyes. "I do have enough to check into his warehouse, discreetly."

"I'm going with you," Mervyn said, and Callisto frowned. That was allowed? "You'll need back-up, especially if he's managed to perform the operation on anyone else."

"I had hoped you'd say that," Malone said, finally cracking a small smile. "I have the Investigator General's blessing to poke around, but he can't spare anyone else. I also don't have the knowledge to keep a heart alive for as long as it would take to transport it back here."

"I'm going, too," Denzil said, glaring at Malone as though Malone in particular would object.

"So am I," Callisto said, more strongly than he felt. But it was his heart, and he couldn't let everyone else go while he sat safe and cozy in Mervyn's house.

"No," Denzil snapped immediately, glaring at him. "It's too dangerous—"

"You're going," Callisto said, cutting Denzil off before he could get any further. "I'm not—it isn't fair for me to sit here while you all put yourselves in danger for me."

"I'm older and more experienced," Denzil said, scowling. Mervyn nickered, earning a fresh glare from Denzil. "Besides, you're still recovering, and that charm isn't perfect."

"It would certainly do well enough," Mervyn said thoughtfully. "Most of the changes that need to be done now are little tweaks, nothing that would incapacitate. It's also been long enough since we put the charm in place that physically it shouldn't slow you down."

"Then I'm going," Callisto said, scowling at Denzil. "And if you try to stop me, I'll just follow you or find my own way. Six blocks from where I was attacked won't be too hard to find."

"You'll have to bind," Denzil said, almost meanly, except that Callisto knew he was only trying to protect him. That blunted Denzil's sharp tone.

"Okay," Callisto said, even if he wasn't completely sure about being bound. But Denzil did it, and he did trust Mervyn... Callisto glanced at Mervyn, stupidly feeling shy, but Mervyn just smiled reassuringly and nodded.

"Fine," Denzil said, more sulkily than anything else. He opened his mouth, then glanced at Malone and shut it, slumping in his seat.

"I can be bound by Malone, if you want," Callisto offered, even though he wasn't really comfortable with the idea. Malone seemed nice, but Callisto knew Mervyn so much better.

"It won't work as well," Malone spoke up, drawing Callisto's attention. "The bond takes better when the two parties know each other."

"Oh," Callisto said, frowning. That made some sense, but then why were there so many forced bindings that worked? Unless most wizards knew their fairies beforehand? Probably, Callisto decided, since most fairies didn't advertise what they were, so it would take some getting to know them before a wizard could be sure.

"It's fine," Denzil finally said, not looking at Malone. "But you do exactly what we say, okay? Don't try to do anything to Baldric, either. It's better if he goes to jail."

"Do anything?" Callisto repeated, baffled for a moment before it clicked. "I'm not going for revenge, Denzil."

Denzil shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I would be."

"You're not to hurt him either, Denzil," Mervyn said, sounding amused. He rested a hand briefly on Callisto's shoulder, and Callisto relaxed a little. At least Mervyn didn't seem upset by having to bind him instead of Denzil.

"I wasn't planning on it," Denzil said, scowling at Mervyn. "And stop—" Denzil waved ambiguously at them.

"Stop what?" Mervyn asked, sounding as confused as Callisto felt.

"I don't know," Denzil muttered, slumping in his seat sulkily. "When are we doing this thing, anyway?"

"As soon as you're ready," Malone said, running a hand over the stubble on his chin. "I was discreet in my earlier inquiries, but the sooner we go, the less chance he'll have to make another run for it."

"We can go in a few hours," Mervyn said firmly. "I have some charms already made that would be useful, and we should probably rest and eat before we go."

"Good idea," Malone said thoughtfully. "That will also give us some time to let the bonding settle."

"Great," Denzil muttered under his breath, and Callisto smothered a smile. Denzil just sounded so cranky, it was hilarious and much easier to focus on than that he would be bonding with Mervyn shortly.

"We'll leave you to it, then," Mervyn said, standing and earning yet another sour look from Denzil. "I'll have Evandie bring you something to eat, and if you want to rest, Malone, you can use my room. I won't be using it."

Malone nodded, and Denzil looked briefly as if he were going to say something, but in the end he just scowled as Mervyn led the way from the room. Callisto followed, wishing he knew more about bonding and that Denzil wasn't so annoyed over the whole thing, but it really didn't make any difference in the end. Denzil would calm down, and Callisto would find out how bonding was done and what it was like shortly.

Mervyn paused in the hallway outside the salon, shutting the door firmly behind him. He turned back towards Callisto, but didn't start walking again. "You don't have to come if you don't want to," Mervyn said slowly. "I understand why you think you should, but we can do this without you, and none of us would look down on you or care if you wanted to stay here."

"I do want to go," Callisto said, flushing a little because it was stupidly harder to be stubborn and somewhat rude to Mervyn. "For the reasons I gave and because..." Callisto hesitated, before continuing more quietly. "Because you and Denzil might not think worse of me for bowing out, but I would think worse of myself. I have to do this; there hasn't been anything else I could do so far."

"Okay," Mervyn said, smiling. "I won't badger you like Denzil, but if you change your mind, all you have to do is say."

"I won't," Callisto said simply.

"I think the library would be the easiest—" Mervyn began, cutting off and turning towards the salon when the door opened behind them. Denzil looked surprised to see them there, but the expression quickly faded.

"You, go away," Denzil said shortly, gesturing to Mervyn. He stepped out into the hallway and shut the door to the salon loudly.

"You're not going to try and talk him out of it some more?" Mervyn asked, making no move to leave.

"No," Denzil said, rolling his eyes. "I thought he might want to know more about being bound, since he's never done it before. Is that all right with you?"

"All right," Mervyn said, smiling and making no apology. "I'll wait in the library."

"Okay," Callisto said, fidgeting nervously as Mervyn walked away. Denzil grabbed his arm, half-guiding, half-dragging Callisto over to the staircase that led to the second floor. Callisto obediently sat on the stairs when Denzil gestured, keeping quiet as Denzil paced restlessly in front of him.

Part Nine

"Are you sure you're up for this? Physically?" Denzil asked after a moment, pausing in his pacing to peer critically at Callisto.

"What did you want to tell me?" Callisto asked, refusing to dignify that question with an answer.

"You've never been bound before," Denzil said, frowning. "Mervyn's pretty gentle about it, as far as that goes, but you have to... accept it, sort of. It's easier if you do, though he can force it if you can't figure it out."

"How do I accept it?" Callisto asked, setting aside the question of how Denzil could compare Mervyn's approach to other wizards' approaches.

"I don't—I can't really explain. You just do. It's like... casting a spell, the ending of it. You follow through," Denzil said impatiently.

"Does it hurt?" Callisto asked, trying not to feel stupid. "If he has to force it?"

"Just uncomfortable, and it doesn't work as well if you have to transfer energy, which is why most wizards will try for a consensual bond before forcing the issue," Denzil said, finally pausing his restless pacing and leaning against the wall near where Callisto was sitting.

"Will Mervyn take energy?" Callisto asked curiously. He wouldn't object if Mervyn did, not after everything Mervyn had done and was doing for him.

"If he ends up casting any fresh spells, then probably. I don't think wizards can help it—it's automatic. The few times Mervyn has drawn from me, he never meant to," Denzil said pensively. "So if you decide to bond with Mervyn, that's something you'll have to deal with."

"What's it like?" Callisto asked, frowning worriedly. If it was anything like the energy drain Baldric had put in place... he'd probably still do it, because it was Mervyn.

"It's... strange. Not painful, not at all, especially if you accept the bond, and Mervyn doesn't have to force it," Denzil said, running a hand through his hair and further disheveling it. "It tingles, I guess, like when your arm or something falls asleep, except right here instead." Denzil tapped his chest, above where his heart was.

"That makes sense," Callisto said, echoing Denzil's movement and touching the charm under his shirt. "That's where the—where Baldric's charm pulled from."

"Right," Denzil muttered, frowning thoughtfully. Callisto waited, somewhat impatiently, wondering if there was more to it. Probably, since none of what Denzil told him was too strange.

"Was there anything else?" Callisto asked curiously, when Denzil just frowned pensively. "Mervyn has to cast a spell, right?"

"Yes," Denzil said distractedly, focusing his gaze on Callisto again. "It's one of the few spells a wizard can cast without a charm, probably because it draws on fairy power to sustain it."

Callisto nodded, unsurprised. Both Baldric's power-drawing charm and Mervyn's replacement heart did the same thing. "Okay," Callisto said, fidgeting briefly with the cuffs of his shirt before making himself stop. "What else?"

Denzil sighed, scrubbing his hand through his hair again. "I'm probably going to explain this poorly, so bear with me. Once the bond sets, you can sort of feel each other. I think it's a side effect of using fairy power to seal the bond."

"Feel each other?" Callisto repeated, baffled for a moment. "Oh, like... when you spell a tree to find out what's wrong with it? You can feel that it's there and sense what's wrong with it?"

"Right," Denzil said, looking relieved. "Just like that, only with you feeling Mervyn." He paused then asked, "They let you diagnose trees? They never let me do that."

"Only as training. They'd figure out what was wrong then have me try," Callisto said, shrugging. He'd been wrong more often than not—no matter what their parents said, he wasn't very good at caring for trees.

"Ah," Denzil said, rolling his eyes. "Did you want to go back, Callisto? We can make it happen, if you do, even if we don't find your real heart."

"How?" Callisto asked, shaking his head. "You know how they are. The least bit of wizard taint—even a scar—and they'll pretend I never existed."

"We'd figure something out. A charm to hide your scars, or add something into your heart charm to obfuscate it," Denzil suggested. "It wouldn't be easy or quick, but we could do it, if that's what you want."

"I don't know," Callisto admitted, shrugging helplessly. "What would I do here, if I stayed? I know how to work an orchard and not much else."

"You paint," Denzil said, his tone suggesting Callisto should have thought of that already. "I didn't know anything but the orchard when I first got here. If you're not happy there, we can find you something you want to do here."

"Right," Callisto said quietly, rubbing at his forehead.

"Before you decide anything, let's go get Baldric arrested," Denzil said, pushing away from the wall. "Then you can decide if you don't want anything further to do with us."

"I don't think anything—" Callisto started, standing up from his seat on the stairs. "I'm not going to go back to mostly ignoring you, Denzil."

"Good," Denzil said, flashing a quick grin—the happiest Callisto had seen since the first time Malone had visited with the news that Baldric had stolen Callisto's heart. "Then let's get you back to Mervyn so he can work his magic on you."

Callisto flushed, but ignored Denzil's smirk. He wasn't sure which was worse—knowing or not knowing how the binding would work.

"Good luck," Denzil said, pausing by the door to the salon. Callisto nodded, feeling briefly guilty that Denzil was stuck bonding with Malone since he obviously wasn't pleased with it.

"You, too," Callisto said quietly, hoping Malone was at least as nice as Mervyn was about the binding.

"Yeah, yeah," Denzil muttered, looking sour again. He didn't say anything though, just turned and let himself back into the salon. Callisto waited a second before continuing on down the hallway to the library. He shouldn't be nervous about this, but knowing that and not actually being nervous were two different things.

He trusted Mervyn. Denzil trusted Mervyn. Mervyn wouldn't decide to not dissolve the binding once they returned from Baldric's warehouse. Ergo, he shouldn't be worried. It was probably just that he'd never done this before. What if he screwed up? Even if what Denzil had said made it seem like it was pretty much all controlled by Mervyn, Callisto was sure there was some way he could mess it up.

But what could he do at this point? Back out? Stay here while Mervyn and Denzil and Malone when out to confront Baldric on his behalf?

No, he'd just have to deal with it. Denzil had done it before, many times if his descriptions were anything to go by. If Denzil could do it, there was no reason Callisto couldn't. Touching the charm under his shirt briefly, Callisto then opened the library door and let himself inside.

Mervyn was sitting in the little reading nook where Callisto usually settled, jotting notes into one of the seemingly endless notebooks he had stashed around the house.

Curious—what could Mervyn be working on now, with only a few hours to go before they left to confront Baldric?—Callisto crossed the library to the reading nook a little more quickly. Mervyn looked up distractedly as Callisto approached the side of his chair, blinking a few times before smiling in greeting.

"So did Denzil try to talk you out of it?" Mervyn asked, setting his notebook and pen on the table in front of him as Callisto took a seat in the closest chair.

"He didn't really try," Callisto said, nervous all over again. "He just told me what it's like."

"Good," Mervyn said, making a face. "From what he's told me, it's quite different how the spell casting feels from your end."

"Just the spell casting?" Callisto asked, curious despite his nerves. "Do you feel the bond the same way?"

"As far as I can tell, yes," Mervyn said, smiling cheerfully. "Though that's all hearsay, of course."

"Have you bonded to anyone besides Denzil?" Callisto asked shyly, wondering if that was rude to ask.

"Once," Mervyn said, frowning briefly. "In an emergency, but it only lasted a few minutes before I dissolved it."

Callisto hesitated, but decided against asking more, since whatever the circumstances, it obviously wasn't a happy memory for Mervyn.

"On that note, if you ever want the bond dissolved, just say the word," Mervyn said, completely serious. "Be it a few minutes in, or even while I'm casting the spell, just let me know and I'll break it."

"I will," Callisto said, resolving to not say a word unless it was completely unbearable. He was going to go with them, no matter how strange the bond might feel. "Denzil didn't say anything about how the casting works."

"It's pretty simple," Mervyn said, falling into what Callisto thought of as 'teacher mode.' "There's no charm, since the spell basically uses us as the charm."

"Using my magic," Callisto said, since Denzil had said that.

"Right," Mervyn said, smiling. He leaned forward, holding a hand out towards Callisto. "We need only to be touching, and the spell casting takes only a moment. It's very simple, nothing like the charm spells I've cast for you before."

"We do it now?" Callisto asked, taking Mervyn's hand shyly.

"Unless you have objections," Mervyn said, squeezing Callisto's hand reassuringly.

Callisto shook his head, then said, "Go ahead."

"Okay. Just try to stay relaxed, okay?" Mervyn said, quiet and soothing. Callisto nodded, taking a deep breath and relaxing as much as he could convince his stiff muscles to unbend. Mervyn started chanting quietly, his hold on Callisto's hand solid and secure. A strange pressure started building in Callisto's chest, making it harder to breathe. It felt like a strangely muted version of Baldrick's heart charm and the way it constricted his chest.

Except this was unequivocally not Baldrick's charm—it was unmistakably Mervyn, and Callisto could *feel* that, though he wasn't sure how he was supposed to 'accept' it like Denzil had said. Mervyn was still chanting, though, and Callisto took another deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Mervyn stopped chanting then, and Callisto hesitated, but then *pulled* at the magic he so seldom used, forcing it up and out and the bond settled into place resoundingly, sending a searing burst of pain through the hole in his chest where the charm resided.

Callisto doubled over, breathing shallowly, but the pain disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Blinking, Callisto sat up slowly, trying to reach for the charm, but his hand was still tangled with Mervyn's, and Mervyn was kneeling in front of him, looking concerned.

"Are you all right?" Mervyn asked, peering worriedly up at him. He didn't release his hold on Callisto's hand, but Callisto didn't mind at all.

"I think so," Callisto said, and the bond really was as Denzil had described. He could feel Mervyn; not strongly, but well enough to tell he was physically okay and close.

"It shouldn't have hurt you," Mervyn said, frowning. "I wonder..."

"What?" Callisto prompted when Mervyn just sat there, staring at Callisto's chest distractedly.

"I wonder if, by installing his charm, Baldric warped your energy paths," Mervyn said, reaching out and tapping the charm under Callisto's shirt. "There's a theory—just a theory, mind you, no one has ever proven it's truth—that the center of every wizard's and every fairy's power is collected in the torso. Specifically, near the heart or in the heart. By placing the charm there, Baldric may have purposefully disrupted that, though how he knew to put it there and how he made it work at all is beyond me."

"So it will hurt like that every time I use magic?" Callisto asked, wondering if that was what Mervyn was trying to say.

"Just when you bond or give energy, I believe," Mervyn said, shaking his head a little, as though to clear it. "I am sorry. I never meant to cause you pain."

"You couldn't have known," Callisto said, shrugging. "It doesn't hurt anymore, at least."

"Good," Mervyn said, smiling at him, and he still hadn't let go of Callisto's hand, but Callisto wasn't going to think too much into that yet. "The bond feels normal and stable from this end."

"It seems okay here, too," Callisto said, shrugging. "So far as I can tell, anyway."

"Excellent," Mervyn said cheerfully. "Let me know if that changes at all, or if you feel any pain again."

"I will," Callisto promised, reluctantly letting go of Mervyn's hand as he stood. "Um, what now?"

"Well, I have to go ready some charms in case Baldric tries anything," Mervyn said slowly. "You're welcome to come with me, if you like. Or you can get some rest before we go."

"I'd prefer to go with you," Callisto said quietly, shrugging awkwardly. "I think I'm too keyed up about it to rest or read."

"I thought as much," Mervyn said, waiting for Callisto to stand before moving to collect his notebook. "I'm the same way, usually. I don't know how Denzil can sleep before we go out and do things like this."

"Denzil is very good at sleeping," Callisto said wryly, unsurprised. "How often do you do things like this?"

"Once every few months," Mervyn said, opening the door to the hallway. "Malone has gotten special dispensation from the Inspector General to use Denzil and I as supplementary forces. Being an Investigator isn't exactly a prestigious job for a wizard, and it's a job most fairies stay away from, so I think he was pleased to have us in any respect."

"Ah," Callisto said quietly, wondering what else Denzil had his fingers in that he hadn't shared. Though he couldn't complain too much, considering he and Denzil hadn't spoken much before this ill-fated trip into the city. Hopefully the past experiences Mervyn and Denzil had shared would help ensure that everything went smoothly this time.

"Come on, I'll show you some of my more exciting fire spells," Mervyn said, smiling mischievously. "Even the one that caught Denzil on fire. He completely deserved it for poking around in my fire work room, and he was only lightly singed, so don't believe whatever he tells you about it."

Callisto laughed, distracted, and he decided to just focus on Mervyn and his myriad charms in the next few hours, rather than try and come up with every possible way storming Baldric's warehouse could go wrong.

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Mervyn adjusted the collar of his jacket against the late evening's breeze, wondering if there would ever be a point when he didn't get nervous about going on a mission like this. He'd been on a dozen trips to check out wizards—with Denzil, with Malone, and with both of them together. Usually they weren't sure beforehand whether the wizard they were checking out was actually behind whatever they were investigating. Perhaps part of his anxiety stemmed from knowing what Baldric was capable of. Another part was definitely Callisto's presence.

Mervyn glanced over at Callisto walking beside him, but if Callisto was nervous, it didn't show on his face. Mervyn half-wished Callisto had stayed behind, except Callisto had just as much right to be here, to possibly confront Baldric, as Denzil did. Mervyn wasn't going to get in the way of that, even if they ran the risk of Callisto finding out first-hand that his original heart was gone.

"How are you doing?" Mervyn asked, pitching his voice low so that Denzil and Malone, walking in front of them, couldn't hear.

"Okay," Callisto said, glancing at him briefly, but he was obviously lying.

"I'm nervous," Mervyn confided, smiling sheepishly. Callisto stared at him for a second, obviously not having expected that admission. "I always am, no matter how many times we do this sort of thing."

"How many times have you done this, again?" Callisto asked, glancing at Denzil and Malone before returning his attention to Mervyn.

"About a dozen. Sometimes with just Denzil, sometimes with just Malone, and sometimes with both," Mervyn said, tucking his hands in his pockets.

"And it always goes as planned?" Callisto asked, his quiet voice getting even more so, making Mervyn strain to pick out his words.

"Usually, and when it doesn't, we're pretty good at improvising," Mervyn said, hoping that was reassuring in some measure. "None of us have ever been hurt doing this, either."

"Because of the shield charms?" Callisto asked, lifting his left wrist, where the shield charm Mervyn had given him was wrapped around his wrist. All he had to do was press a button on the watch-shaped charm, and an opaque shield would protect him from any charms Baldric cast.

"That, and we're good at what we do," Mervyn said, smiling cheerfully. Callisto looked briefly amused for a moment before his expression turned solemn again.

"It will be okay, Callisto," Mervyn said reassuringly. "If we get in the warehouse and it looks too dangerous, Malone will call it off and come back with more Investigators." Callisto nodded, but he was still worried. Mervyn could tell that even without the pressure of the bond telling him so. "How long do you think Denzil will last before he snaps and tries to kill Malone?" Mervyn asked, stepping closer to Callisto so he could drop his voice some.

Callisto laughed a little, studying Denzil's back speculatively. "I'm surprised he's lasted this long."

"Me, too," Mervyn said, wondering how much Denzil was going to bitch later about being paired with Malone. A lot, probably. Maybe he could somehow foist that off on Callisto, except that wasn't very nice.

"We're close," Malone announced, turning towards them. Denzil scowled, turning quickly on his heel, but he didn't say a word about Malone's sudden stop. "You remember what you have to do?"

"Callisto and I are going in the front, since he's probably concentrated whatever defenses he has in place at the back," Mervyn rattled off obediently.

"We don't split up, no matter what," Callisto said, fidgeting briefly with his shield charm.

"We keep in touch if we find anything important," Mervyn said, touching the communication charm he wore around his neck. Denzil wore the match, since he refused to let Malone have it.

"Go slowly, and leave if you run into trouble," Malone said gravely. "Don't try to be heroic. If Baldric's there and proves to be dangerous, we can contain him in the building until we have back-up."

Callisto nodded, and Mervyn hoped it didn't come to anything as drastic as that. He and Malone both had the set of charms necessary to restrain Baldric and prevent him from using his magic; if they got close enough, neutralizing him would be simple.

"Let's go then," Malone said, and Denzil made a face at him, but stayed quiet. Thankfully, Denzil was good at not fussing or bitching too much in the middle of an important task.

Callisto nodded again, and Mervyn waited until Malone and Denzil started walking again to reach out and grab Callisto's hand. Callisto glanced at him, obviously startled by the gesture. "For safety," Mervyn said solemnly. "At least, that's what I plan to tell Denzil."

Callisto laughed, smiling shyly, and Mervyn smiled back, pleased that Callisto understood. He squeezed Callisto's hand and started walking again, trying to tamp down his own nerves as much as he could. Whatever residual effect was echoing through the bond wouldn't be helping Callisto stay calm.

They reached Baldric's warehouse in the next moment. It was identical to the two buildings on either side of it except that there were no lights on at all. The nearby warehouses had lights illuminating the outsides of the buildings. They also had light visible through the small windows set high in the warehouse walls, near the roof.

"He has the windows blocked?" Mervyn asked, which made sense. Baldric couldn't take the risk of anyone, purposefully or not, seeing what he was up to.

"Yes," Malone said, not looking pleased. It's why I couldn't verify anything other than Baldric being here."

Mervyn nodded, studying the building thoughtfully. Provided Baldric hadn't made many modifications, the warehouse should be a single, large room with a series of offices near the back door—the other reason Denzil and Malone were taking the back. Baldric was likely living and working out of the offices. The rest of the warehouse was probably used for work space.

Best case, Denzil and Malone would take care of Baldric, and he and Callisto would find and take possession of Callisto's heart.

"Wait until we're in position to enter," Malone was saying, nodding to Denzil. "He will tell you when."

"Right," Mervyn said, smiling easily at Denzil when he gave them a suspicious look, his gaze dropping to where Mervyn still held Callisto's hand.

"Let's go, Denzil," Malone said, running a hand over his freshly-shaved head. He didn't look nervous, but Malone rarely showed what he was thinking or feeling.

"Yes, yes," Denzil muttered, scowling. "Take care of Callisto, Mervyn. Anything happens to him, and I'll hold you responsible."

"Nothing will happen. I'll make sure of it," Mervyn said, smothering a grin when Malone cleared his throat pointedly.

"I'm coming," Denzil snapped, eyeing Callisto briefly before settling on simply nodding. Callisto nodded back jerkily, but didn't say anything aloud. Denzil turned on his heel, walking past Malone with an impatient, "Well?"

"Good luck," Malone said, quirking a small smile before turning to follow Denzil. They disappeared into the shadow of the building, and Mervyn quickly switched on the communication charm. The communication charm crackled after a moment—a side effect of reaching the range of the spell, but it would work for their purpose.

Callisto shifted restlessly behind him, but he didn't say anything. Mervyn stayed quiet, too, waiting patiently as he studied the warehouse. It was a foreboding-looking structure in the twilight, though it probably looked fairly innocuous during the daytime.

"We're in place," Denzil's voice said, obscured only a little by static. "Go... head."

"Going," Mervyn replied, touching the charm lightly to speak through it. He glanced at Callisto, who nodded, and they started walking slowly towards the front door.

Unsurprisingly, the door was locked, but Malone had been prepared for that—he'd brought a few lock-pick charms from the Investigator's office for them to use. They were much more robust than Mervyn's lock-pick charms were since they were used on a variety of doors. Pulling the charm from his pocket with his free hand, Mervyn wrapped it around the doorknob and then murmured the activation words.

The lock came undone with a soft click, and Mervyn made a note to try to emulate the spell when he had some free time again. Mervyn glanced briefly at Callisto, who nodded again, and then opened the door. It didn't creak or slam open dramatically, and Mervyn crept inside slowly, Callisto on his heels.

It was pitch dark inside, and Mervyn resisted the urge to create a light. There was no sense in drawing Baldric's attention before they needed to. "We're in. No lights," Mervyn whispered into the charm, noting distractedly that it already crackled less than it had before.

"We'll find them," Denzil promised, his voice echoing strangely. "Stay where you are."

"Got it," Mervyn said, jumping a little when Callisto shut the door behind him.

"I can make fairy lights," Callisto offered, his whispered voice sounding loud in the darkness.

"Maybe in a minute," Mervyn replied, just a quietly. It wasn't likely that Baldric had bound himself to a fairy—the only way a wizard could see fairy lights—but if Denzil and Malone could turn on the lights first, that would be one less thing for them to worry about.

Callisto didn't reply, just stepped a little closer. It was silent, almost completely so. There were faint mechanical sounds coming from somewhere deeper in the warehouse, but nothing close. Mervyn took a deep breath, slowly letting it out, and forced himself to stay patient. Impatience would just botch the entire thing.

"Lights?" Mervyn finally asked over the communication charm when he could no longer wait.

"Not yet," Denzil snapped back. "Stay there. We've found something."

Rolling his eyes, Mervyn decided he'd had enough waiting. Possibly Denzil was on the level about them not finding the light switch yet, but it could be his way to keep Callisto out of the action and away from any danger.

"Go ahead with the fairy lights," Mervyn said quietly. "Keep them as dim as you can, in case he is bound to a fairy."

"Okay," Callisto said, then hesitated before saying, "I need my hand."

Mervyn laughed quietly, but relinquished Callisto's hand. Callisto didn't say anything further—Denzil usually grumbled whenever he was casting a minor spell—and a moment later a handful of dimly lit fairy lights appeared, floating just slightly above the ground. Callisto looked strange in the dim, bluish light cast by the small spheres, but it was probably due to the nature of the light.

"You okay?" Mervyn asked, just in case casting really did hurt Callisto now.

"Fine," Callisto said, glancing at him with a slight frown marring his face. "Do you think that's dim enough? I don't think I can go any darker without them going out."

"Looks good to me," Mervyn said, eyeing the fairy lights critically. They weren't very bright, and hopefully Denzil and Malone would find either the light switch or Baldric soon. "Shall we?"

Callisto nodded, glancing around curiously. There were large crates stacked around the entrance, effectively cordoning it off. There was a gap in the crates straight ahead, and Mervyn wondered if the crates were put there by Baldric or if they were left over from when this had been an actual warehouse.

"Stay close, okay?" Mervyn said, frowning worriedly at the entrance to the rest of the warehouse.

"Okay," Callisto said, smiling briefly. Mervyn fought the urge to grin, but it really wasn't the best time or place to be flirting with Callisto. He wished briefly it were practical to hold Callisto's hand again, silly as it was, but he really did need to have his hands free if they encountered any spells.

Moving forward slowly, Mervyn checked the crates as well as he could for spell marks. Nothing was visible, but that didn't mean anything. The marks could certainly be on the inside, as they had been with Callisto's heart charm.

They walked through the gap in the crates slowly, but thankfully no spells launched at them. Past the crates, the room was more open, so probably the crates merely served as a screen to hide the magical equipment in the rest of the space. It obviously wouldn't hold up to scrutiny for long, but it probably didn't need to.

Callisto's fairy lights only illuminated a small part of the warehouse, but Mervyn already recognized a handful of nearby instruments. They were surrounded by a series of long, low-slung tables arranged neatly in a wide rectangle, and a few large, stand-alone machines.

"What is this for?" Callisto asked trepidaciously. Not that Mervyn could blame him—this warehouse was where Baldric had operated on him.

"Metal working," Mervyn said, leading the way towards a table further into the rectangle. "These are botched charms." The table was covered in strangely misshapen chunks of metal. Some vaguely resembled the charm Mervyn had removed from Callisto's chest, but none of them came even close to the intricate work that had been used in the original charm.

"Prototypes, maybe?" Mervyn mused. That could explain it. None of these were as intricate as the charm Callisto had had, but if Baldric had begun implanting them in people as soon as the charms had shown progress...

Callisto shrugged, leaving a few of the lights at Mervyn's feet and wandering towards a nearby table.

"Don't touch anything," Mervyn cautioned, eyeing the poorly made charms one last time before moving to join Callisto. The table Callisto stood in front of contained more tools to shape metal, but they were very low quality. Mervyn frowned pensively, but didn't comment. It was possible Baldric had finer tools elsewhere, or had done the fine points of his charm building elsewhere.

"I think he's somewhat organized, at least," Mervyn said, glancing again at the tables around them. "This area seems to be devoted to charm building."

Callisto nodded, frowning at a chisel-shaped tool. The head of the tool was narrower than that of a proper chisel, but the shape was the same. "What section would he keep my heart in?" Callisto asked, and he was probably asking about the 'theme' of the section of the warehouse where Baldric would have stored his heart.

"Health? But the majority of his spell work here would be health-magic related. He may have it secured somewhere, or it may be kept near wherever he did the operation," Mervyn said quietly, squinting into the darkness at a half-imagined flash of light. It didn't repeat or he had imagined it, so Mervyn dismissed it.

"Come on, let's keep moving," Mervyn suggested, wondering if he really should have protested Callisto coming along, as he didn't really seem to be handling it well.

Callisto nodded, giving him an obviously forced smile before heading deeper into the warehouse. They passed more tables with instruments, failed charms, books, and loose papers covered in scribbles. Callisto became even quieter as they progressed, obviously more affected by being here than he'd thought he'd be.

The communication charm crackled as they were examining a table that held a number of empty jars with spell marks inscribed on the top. Mervyn jumped, startled by the sudden noise in the silent warehouse.

"Mervyn," Malone's voice said, barely crackling. Mervyn frowned—Denzil had the charm. Denzil wouldn't willingly hand the charm off to Malone, not unless he had no other choice. Then the warehouse lights flooded on, almost blindingly bright in their intensity.

"Yes?" Mervyn asked, turning away from the table. "What's wrong?"

Callisto tensed beside him, apparently only belatedly realizing that it wasn't Denzil on the charm. Glancing up, Mervyn instinctively stepped forward, snatching the charm Baldric had thrown out of the air before it could hit Callisto.

Part Ten

The thrum of foreign magic zinged up his arm, and Malone's voice cut off mid-word. Scowling, Mervyn dropped the charm—a flashy, gem-encrusted pendant in the shape of stylized cross—and stepped completely in front of Callisto. The charm clanged against the floor loudly, and Callisto flinched back away from it.

"What was that?" Callisto asked, his voice surprisingly even. The fairy lights around them went out, unnecessary in the brightness of the warehouse.

"It was a counter-charm," Mervyn said, gaze never wavering from Baldric. "It killed all the charms I'm carrying." The active ones, anyway. Whether Baldric had thought to include the inactive ones was up for debate. Baldric was dressed neatly, as though he'd been expecting company.

"So if I had touched it—" Callisto said faintly, and Mervyn winced. If Callisto had touched it, his heart charm would have stopped working immediately.

"Right," Mervyn said, refraining from again telling Callisto to keep from touching anything. Callisto wouldn't, especially not now. If Baldric was here, and Malone had been on the communication charm, then did that mean Baldric had already gotten the better of Malone and Denzil? "Are we doing this the easy way or the hard way, Baldric?" Mervyn asked, keeping his voice as even as he could despite the itching urge to chuck something at Baldric and run for it.

"Are you kidding me?" Baldric asked, laughing. He truly had an unpleasant laugh, Mervyn decided, even if he had a bias against the man. "You have no charms, your partners are locked in a supply closet, and I can counter anything your fairy tries magically."

"Counter-charms don't work on fairy magic," Mervyn said, buying time. Malone was okay, if the communication charm was anything to go by, and Baldric wouldn't kill Denzil simply because he could use Denzil's energy.

"No, but they will kill whatever charm you cooked up to replace mine," Baldric said, almost cheerfully. Certainly maliciously. "Where is my charm, by the way?"

"Destroyed," Mervyn said flatly, even though it was sitting safely in one of his work rooms. "So that no one else tries to emulate what you did."

Baldric laughed again, smirking at them. It made his squished face look even uglier. "Why do you think I'm the only one who knows how to do it?"

"I suppose that's giving you too much credit," Mervyn said casually, recalling what he'd thought previously about the charm. "Based on the lousy attempts at recreating it, I bet that charm wasn't

something you personally made. Combined with the shoddy spell work, it's truly a wonder you managed to make it work for you at all."

"Shut up," Baldric snapped, obviously riled. So some part of that was true, or perhaps Baldric was proud enough of his work that he didn't like hearing it maligned. "Are you bonded? Or can he not do that anymore?"

"We are. You can't kill him," Callisto said, and his voice thrummed with tension, but it didn't waver at all. "Where's my heart?"

"Oh, around here somewhere," Baldric said flippantly, but his gaze slipped to the right, so it was deeper in the warehouse somewhere.

Mervyn hesitated, then reached behind him, blindly holding his hand out to Callisto. It took a moment, but Callisto gingerly took Mervyn's hand, unresisting when Mervyn pulled him close. "When I say, run," Mervyn said quietly, almost too quiet to be heard. "Find Denzil."

Callisto didn't respond. He was close enough that Mervyn could feel his warm breath against the side of his throat. Baldric was eyeing them suspiciously, though, so hopefully Callisto would do it without further prompting.

"How do you expect this to end, Baldric? You can't kill me, or you lose Callisto. If you cast, he will, and you won't be able to stop him from casting if you're in the middle of a spell," Mervyn said, drawing Baldric's attention to him again.

"I have Denzil now," Baldric said, feigning nonchalance, but Mervyn was sure he'd settle for nothing less than having both fairies and their energy at his disposal.

"Two is better than one," Mervyn said simply then added, squeezing Callisto's hand reassuringly, "And with your terrible spell work, the extra energy would be necessary."

"Shut *up*," Baldric snarled, throwing another charm at them with a snarled activation word.

Mervyn moved, pulling Callisto with him as the charm clattered uselessly past them and into the recesses of the warehouse. Callisto stumbled, falling against him, but Mervyn didn't give him time to recover, but pushed him away, towards the back of the warehouse.

"Go," Mervyn said, firmly. "Please."

Callisto hesitated half a second before nodding clumsily. He took off, sprinting, and Mervyn didn't hesitate, but turned and threw himself at Baldric.

Another charm clattered against the floor—Baldric apparently had terrible aim in addition to being a terrible wizard. He ducked back as Mervyn got close, throwing another charm that went wide, though in the opposite direction of the first. Something nagged about that, and the activation words Baldric was speaking weren't normal spell activators.

Combined with the smirk on his face... Baldric was up to something. He didn't seem at all concerned that Callisto had run off either. Mervyn stopped—in time for Baldric to drop the last charm directly in the front of him, completing the spell for the magic cage. It sprung up around Mervyn instantly, energy crackling from each of the three charms to a point above Mervyn's head.

Mervyn cursed quietly; he should have recognized that sooner. He also shouldn't have underestimated Baldric.

"It seems you're decent at simple spells, at least," Mervyn said, testing the shield with a touch of a fingertip. It zapped him in warning, so Mervyn would have to keep Baldric distracted enough that he couldn't follow Callisto just through talking.

"Did I tell you to be quiet?" Baldric asked, pulling another fancy, over-the-top piece of jewelry from his pocket.

"Maybe a few times. I don't really recall," Mervyn said flippantly, and it was probably the wrong tact to take, but he didn't think he was capable of playing nice and trying to cozy up to Baldric.

"Well, do it anyway," Baldric said, throwing the charm at him and speaking the activation words. Mervyn had nowhere to go—the spell cage was well-positioned to block his movements, and the charm hit him squarely in the chest.

Mervyn caught it as it fell, frowning at the spell marks even as his throat tingled with the spell energy. It was obviously meant to block his voice completely, but—

"Wow, you can't do a charm this simple correctly?" Mervyn asked, hefting the charm. Baldric turned bright red, his squished face looking comical contorted in anger as it was.

"What did you do to it?" Baldric demanded, stepping closer, but not into the path of the spelled cage.

"I caught it," Mervyn said dryly, twisting the ostentatious, jewel-studded dragon charm in his hands. "It would have worked, if—"

"If, what?" Baldric snapped, obviously still furious.

"If you weren't so sloppy," Mervyn finished with a smile, making a show of tucking the little dragon figurine away. Baldric scowled, snarling out several choice spell words.

The spell cage activated anew, sending a searing jolt of energy lancing through Mervyn. He managed not to scream—barely—but couldn't stop the strangled sound that broke free as his knees hit the concrete floor of the warehouse.

"I told you to shut up," Baldric said smugly, glancing in the direction Callisto had run off. "How long do you suppose it will take him to come back?"

Mervyn ignored him, focusing on breathing and trying to remember what he knew about spell cages. Not much—they weren't illegal, but only just. They were most often used by law enforcement to contain malicious wizards until their magic could be properly restrained.

"He will come back," Baldric said, pacing closer to the cage. "If only for you. I'm not stupid, you know. Between the way you two act together and this, he'll be back."

Mervyn looked up, frowning, and his heart dropped. Baldric held a medium-sized, clear jar in which sat a heart. It slumped against the bottom of the jar, and even in the fluorescent glow of the warehouse lights, Mervyn could see it was half-rotted. Probably still alive enough to link Baldric to Callisto, but returning it to Callisto's chest would kill him.

"You can't even keep an organ from rotting?" Mervyn demanded, uncaring that he sounded angry and not taunting.

"It doesn't need to be fully alive," Baldric said, sneering. "What, were you hoping to put it back?"

Mervyn said nothing, just glared at the nearest of the three charms that made up the spell cage. The more charm points in a spell cage, the stronger it was. A cage had to have a minimum of three points, so this was a fairly weak spell cage.

"You were!" Baldric crowed, apparently interpreting Mervyn's silence as affirmation. "How cute! What's he giving you? Probably the bond, though that won't be an issue soon enough."

"What do you mean?" Mervyn asked, distracted. Did Baldric have some way to force the removal of a bond?

"You'll disband it, or I'll kill you both," Baldric said, shrugging. "I have no use for a fairy that's bound to another wizard."

"Ah, and here I was overestimating your skill again," Mervyn said, rolling his eyes. "Of course you'd resort to physical threats instead of spell casting."

"There's no way to break a bond with a spell," Baldric said, scoffing at him.

"Just like there's no way to take a fairy's energy without a bond," Mervyn said, shifting so he could sit more casually on the floor. It was no more comfortable, but he doubted anyone could sit comfortably on a concrete floor without pillows in his pants. It probably wasn't smart to taunt Baldric so much, especially with the idea of a spell that didn't exist, but Mervyn had played it stupid and reckless so far. It would be strange to change his tune now.

Baldric stared at him suspiciously for a moment before shaking his head. "You're lying. It can't be done."

"All right," Mervyn said nonchalantly. "I'm lying."

"Shut up," Baldric said, scowling. He turned his back on Mervyn, moving to set the jar that held Callisto's heart on a nearby table. He fussed with the instruments on the table for a moment, obviously impatient, and Mervyn took the chance to study the spell marks on the nearest charm.

It was a fairly simple spell, but Mervyn had expected nothing less of Baldric. The charm he was looking at reached out to the other "like" charms in the close vicinity, however many there were, and formed an energy barrier between them. An additional component allowed the caster to flood the area with energy—the shock Baldric had inflicted on him earlier.

It drew that energy directly from Baldric, which meant that the longer Mervyn stayed in the cage, the more energy it drew. The energy flood would also draw a lot of energy from Baldric, but Mervyn was pretty sure he didn't want to incite any more of those.

The simple spell Baldric had used for the spell cage would be easy enough to offset, if Mervyn could get an uninterrupted moment or two to cast the counter spell. Unfortunately, there wasn't much Mervyn could do to that end from within the cage.

"Do you work with many fairies?" Baldric asked, turning back towards Mervyn. "Probably, since you work with Denzil so often. He always talked about you being a 'good' wizard, but that can't be all true if you bound Callisto to you."

"And if Callisto accepted the bond willingly?" Mervyn asked, not even deigning to acknowledge Baldric's terribly unsubtle attempt to get more fairies through him.

"Then I guess he'll come back even more quickly," Baldric said, flashing a grin. "You seem like the sort of wizard who would take good notes."

Mervyn laughed, shaking his head. "I don't take notes about anyone I treat."

"Not even for billing?" Baldric asked, apparently thinking he was being sly.

"Billing is only necessary if you charge people. I'm sure Janan has grumbled about his stupid younger brother who gave up working at the hospital to work for people who can't pay," Mervyn said, laughing again when recognition finally dawned on Baldric's squished face. "There's no way you can find anyone I've worked for based on paperwork."

"Then you'll just have to tell me," Baldric said, stalking back over to the spell cage. "How many fairies have you worked with?"

Mervyn stayed quiet, looking up at Baldric with a small smile. He was probably going to get shocked again, but there was no way he was going to let Baldric do to any other fairy what he'd done to Callisto. "They gave me false names, false residences... if fairies were stupid about hiding themselves, you would have found more by yourself," Mervyn said, rolling his eyes. He paused thoughtfully then shrugged. "Though, given your level of intelligence, maybe not."

Baldric snapped out the spell words to kick off the energy flood again, and Mervyn jerked, unable to hold still as the energy jolted through him again. It was weaker than the previous flood of energy had been, so Baldric was probably trying to conserve his energy where he could.

"Tell me the names anyway," Baldric ordered, his raised voice echoing towards the ceiling.

"No. Is that really all the shock you have left?" Mervyn asked, scoffing derisively. "It must be so hard, being restricted to using just the energy you have naturally."

"Shut up. Give me the names, or I'll make it worse," Baldric said, scowling. He looked and sounded like nothing more than a petulant child whose mother wouldn't give into his demands for another treat.

Mervyn just laughed, crossing his arms and staring up at Baldric challengingly. "Do it, then."

Baldric would shock him and demand names again. Mervyn would refuse and hopefully be able to keep taking the abuse until Callisto returned. Then, hopefully, Mervyn would be able to break the spell cage while Baldric was distracted, and then he and Callisto could overpower Baldric, whose energy resources would be low enough that he couldn't cast any large spells.

It wasn't a great plan, but getting stuck in a spell cage was rather limiting.

"Fine," Baldric snapped, speaking the spell words like curses. Mervyn braced himself, but it did little good as the energy flooded through him with more intensity than he thought possible. It only lasted a few seconds, but it *hurt*, and Mervyn didn't remember screaming, but Baldric certainly looked pleased with himself.

Mervyn focused on calming his breathing, ignoring the way his skin still tingled with pins and needles, as if it had all fallen asleep at once. This really wasn't a good plan, but he wasn't giving up any names, fake or real, and he didn't have any other options.

"Names," Baldric demanded, stepping right up to the edge of the spell cage. "Give me names, and I won't do it again."

"No," Mervyn said, shaking his head dismissively. "Do you really think they'd come to me at all if I gave them up that easily? Fake names or not, I'm not telling."

"You'll change your mind," Baldric said confidently. "Unless you really don't care about Callisto. Then you might stay quiet even when I give him the same treatment. How will it affect that charm you've given him, I wonder?"

Mervyn just shook his head. A spell cage wouldn't work on Callisto—he could easily disrupt its magic with his own, since fairy magic didn't require a charm or a spoken spell.

"This would be simpler if you just told me what you know," Baldric said, turning away from Mervyn and walking back over to the table where he'd left Callisto's heart. "I wouldn't have to do a thing to you or Callisto if I had another fairy to work with."

"Do you really think I'm as stupid as you are?" Mervyn asked, watching Baldric's shoulders stiffen at the insult. "You're not going to let either of us go. We know too much, and the entire point of your heart charm is that it allows you to draw from multiple fairies at once."

"Well, then you know the more fairies with the heart charm, the less draw there is on any one fairy," Baldric said, picking up the jar with Callisto's heart inside and shaking it back and forth. Mervyn winced, but there wasn't anything he could do for it. "Don't you want Callisto to suffer less?"

"He's not suffering now," Mervyn said dryly, flexing his fingers as the last of the pins-and-needles sensation faded from them. "And you don't have a decent charm to use anymore since your workmanship is obviously subpar to whoever created the original."

"It's not hard to get new charms," Baldric said, but he was lying and terrible at it. He had no charms, but wanted to keep Callisto and find more fairies anyway.

"Sure, I believe that," Mervyn said flippantly. "You're as good a liar as you are a wizard."

"Shut up," Baldric said darkly, stalking back towards the spell cage. "You are the most insufferable—"

Baldric cut off, turning on his heel when something clattered behind him. Mervyn took the chance and started chanting, pulling a blank scrap of fabric from a pocket to serve as the charm. Baldric whipped back towards him, furious.

"Stop that," he snapped, but Mervyn ignored him, even when Baldric started chanting the spell to flood the spell cage with energy again. Before Baldric could complete the spell, however, another tool came flying out from being a large metal press, presumably where Callisto was hiding. It hit Baldric square in the back, and he fumbled the spell words then cursed heartily.

Mervyn finished his counter to the spell cage in the next moment, wincing at the clatter from behind the metal press as he pulled energy from Callisto. He'd forgotten that casting from scratch would hurt Callisto. Standing, Mervyn pitched it at the perimeter of the cage. It caught in the energy flow, and the entire cage flashed blue before disappearing.

Baldric cursed again, reaching into his pocket for a new charm. Mervyn reacted instantly, pulling out a charm of his own and tossing it at Baldric. It wouldn't work, of course, but it was enough to make Baldric jerk back and drop his charm.

Callisto threw another tool, hitting Baldric on the upper thigh and making him fumble the jar he still held. "I'll drop it," Baldric yelled, threateningly tipping the jar. "You don't want me to kill your heart, do you?"

"It's too late," Mervyn said, scowling. "There's no recovering it from that state, and you know it."

"I can rejuvenate it," Baldric said confidently, still lying terribly, but Callisto probably couldn't see him from where he was hidden. "It's not an easy process, but it can be done."

"There's no way to 'rejuvenate' rotted flesh," Mervyn said flatly, wishing he'd been able to break the news to Callisto more gently. "You really are a terrible liar."

"I'm not lying, and it's not rotting," Baldric said, but he wasn't nearly as annoyed as he'd been when Mervyn had called him on his other lies. "Come out and see."

"If it's not rotting, why would you even need to rejuvenate it?" Callisto asked skeptically, stepping out from behind the metal press. He still held a handful of instruments, but he looked otherwise unarmed.

"Good point," Baldric said nastily then threw the jar at Callisto. Callisto jerked back a step, and the jar crashed to the floor at his feet. Mervyn winced, but he couldn't do anything about that for the moment because Baldric had lunged right at him.

Mervyn stumbled back, thinking Baldric was going to try another charm, but he wasn't chanting and the glint of steel in his hand didn't register until Baldric was right there, and Mervyn could see the knife clearly.

What kind of wizard used a knife? Mervyn thought, baffled, and then Baldric was right there, driving the knife into his leg. Startled—why aim for his *leg*?—Mervyn nonetheless toppled, and the pain hit about the same time he hit the concrete floor. He landed hard on his ass, vaguely registering that Baldric was running away.

Probably to replenish his charms, Mervyn decided, wincing but making himself sit up. The knife was either extremely well-placed or poorly-placed, Mervyn saw, depending on Baldric's goal. It wouldn't kill him—Baldric had missed the major artery—but it would incapacitate him quite well.

Behind him, Baldric fell with a thump and a muffled cry, and Mervyn really hoped he'd tripped over his own feet. Shifting, Mervyn pulled out a scrap of cloth, really wishing he had something sturdier to charm that he could throw—

"Are you all right?" Callisto asked, dropping down to the concrete beside Mervyn with a crack of knees that made Mervyn wince in sympathy.

"Good enough—Baldric?" Mervyn asked, twisting to see, because if Callisto was here then it was probably safe.

"I tripped him," Callisto said, frowning worriedly at Mervyn's leg. His pants were soaked with blood around the knife. "He, um, fell and isn't moving. I think he's unconscious."

"Can you go check?" Mervyn asked, grimacing briefly. "I'd rather not let him run off and rearm himself with more charms."

Callisto hesitated, but finally nodded, pushing himself to his feet and disappearing behind Mervyn. A moment later, he said, "He's either out or faking it really well."

"Hit him as hard as you can," Mervyn suggested, shucking his jacket. He tore out a large strip of the cloth lining, smiling a little when he heard a meaty thump behind him.

"He didn't wake," Callisto said, and something rustled from where he was. "He should be secure for a few minutes."

"Good," Mervyn said, bracing himself and then pulling out the knife, clenching his teeth against the fresh surge of pain. He threw it away and immediately pressed the cloth from his jacket against the wound.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Callisto asked worriedly, returning to Mervyn's side.

"I will be," Mervyn said, pressing the cloth more firmly against the wound in his leg. "This is barely a scratch. Are you all right? How are Denzil and Malone?"

"Malone went to get more help and to put Denzil somewhere safe. Denzil's just knocked out—he walked into a charm that Malone warned him about," Callisto said, rolling his eyes, and Mervyn stifled a smile. "Um, is there anything I can do for that?"

"No, I just need to wrap it, then take care of Baldric so if he wakes before our reinforcements get here he can't use his magic for anything," Mervyn said, then frowned. "Are you okay? I'm sorry I had to draw from you."

"It's fine," Callisto said, reaching up and almost touching his charm before curling his fingers into a fist and dropping it back to his lap.

"Baldric didn't hit you or anything, did he?" Mervyn pressed, frowning worriedly.

"No, I'm fine," Callisto said, glancing towards the scattered remnants of the jar that had held his heart.

"I'm sorry," Mervyn said belatedly, wincing. "There was nothing—he really is a terrible wizard."

"It's okay," Callisto said, actually touching the charm in his chest this time before meeting Mervyn's eyes. "I hoped—but I sort of expected it anyway."

"You can go hit him again, if you like," Mervyn offered, which earned him a faint smile.

"I'd rather make sure you get fixed up," Callisto said, frowning at his leg. "What—what else did he do? I could feel something..." Callisto trailed off, looking entirely too worried about Mervyn considering that he'd just lost his heart.

"Nothing much," Mervyn lied, because Callisto didn't really need to hear about the spell cage and how stupid he'd been to get caught in it. "Some energy spell, which is probably why you felt it."

"You were in a lot of pain," Callisto said then suddenly stripped out of his jacket. He pulled off his shirts—the long-sleeved shirt then the worn-thin undershirt.

"Not that I mind, but why are you taking off your shirt?" Mervyn asked, wondering briefly if something was wrong with Callisto's charm.

"You need a bandage," Callisto said, smiling a little shyly. "Don't change the subject. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No, he really did just zap me," Mervyn said, pleased that he could still get Callisto to smile.

"Just zap you," Callisto muttered, shaking his head as he pulled on his long-sleeved shirt again.

"I think I annoyed him by telling him how bad he is at magic," Mervyn said, smiling as Callisto tore his undershirt into wide strips.

"Do you need one of these for a charm for him? Since he killed all of yours with his counter?" Callisto asked, lifting one of the strips of fabric.

"No, I have spares. Are you okay with me casting another spell?" Mervyn asked, grimacing as he lifted his leg up a little. "We could just gag him."

"I'd rather be sure," Callisto said, shrugging. He didn't sound worried or hesitant about it, so Mervyn decided to let it be for the moment. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"He barely hit me," Mervyn said, shifting his leg so that Callisto could get a better angle and wincing at the pain that flared. "Wrapping it will fix me right up."

"The knife was buried in your leg, and you're bleeding through that," Callisto said, jabbing a finger towards the bunched fabric Mervyn was still pressing to the wound. "And you think he barely hit you?"

"He didn't hit bone or any major arteries, so it's mostly muscle damage. I promise it looks worse than it is," Mervyn said, smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

Callisto scowled, looking startlingly like Denzil for a moment, before gingerly wrapping one of the strips of shirt around Mervyn's leg. "I'm sorry."

"Just knot it with the rag under it," Mervyn said when Callisto hesitated. "Tighter... there, good. Why are you sorry?"

"You got hurt, a lot," Callisto said, picking up another strip of fabric and not meeting Mervyn's eyes.

"Callisto," Mervyn said, waiting for Callisto to finish tying the strip into place before continuing. "It's not your fault. We weren't even supposed to run into Baldrick; Malone and Denzil were. I'm not a battle wizard, otherwise I wouldn't have had my ass so badly kicked, and you're not trained at all. We still did better than Denzil and Malone did."

"Neither of them were stabbed," Callisto pointed out, obviously not any less upset.

"They also didn't get him," Mervyn said, trying for flippant, but it fell flat. "It's okay, really, Callisto. The only thing you should be worried about is your heart."

Callisto stared at him for a minute then tossed a leftover strip of fabric at him. "Spell that to dampen his magic, and I'll go put it on him. You're not moving on that leg until Malone shows up."

"Callisto," Mervyn said, fighting a smile.

"What?" Callisto snapped, and he really was a lot like his brother sometimes.

Mervyn reached up, touched his fingers to Callisto's cheek, and said, "It worked out," before finally giving into the urge and kissing him.

Part Eleven

Mervyn reached up, touched his fingers to Callisto's cheek, and said, "It worked out," before finally giving into the urge and kissing him.

Callisto froze, obviously surprised, and then he kissed back shyly, leaning down so Mervyn didn't have to lever himself up quite so much. Mervyn buried his hand in Callisto's hair, pleased at the length, as it was easy to grip, and tilted Callisto's head just so, deepening the kiss—and then Callisto pulled back, his face red. He was smiling though, and Mervyn grinned back, licking his lips and tasting a hint of Callisto there. "You need to—" Callisto started, pausing to take a quick breath. "You need to do the spell for Baldric."

"All right," Mervyn said, reluctantly picking up the strip of fabric Callisto had thrown at him. "I can't stop it from drawing energy from you."

"It's okay," Callisto said, somewhat impatiently. He glanced over Mervyn's shoulder in Baldric's direction. "I'd rather have him spelled as soon as possible."

"I could break the bond now," Mervyn suggested, ignoring that Malone had made them promise to keep it intact until they returned to Mervyn's house.

"No," Callisto said slowly, frowning. "If we do that, he'll probably wake up at just the wrong moment and take advantage."

"Are you sure? It will hurt." Mervyn reiterated, aware of how hypocritical it was to not let Callisto be upset that he'd be hurt, but to be upset himself when Callisto would be hurt.

"Just do it," Callisto said, definitely impatient now. "The sooner you get it done, the sooner he will be spelled. I would really like him to be spelled."

"Callisto—" Mervyn began again.

"Do it," Callisto said, insistent and stubborn. Mervyn sighed, simply holding out his hand. Callisto accepted it, looking faintly puzzled. "Does this help?"

"No, I just wanted to hold your hand," Mervyn said, smiling slowly.

"Ah," Callisto said quietly, smiling shyly in return. "Cast it."

"Yes, sir," Mervyn said, almost cheerful except he couldn't forget that this would hurt Callisto. "Hold on as tight as you want." Callisto just nodded, squeezing Mervyn's hand in acknowledgement. Mervyn took that as his signal and started chanting the spell, watching as the spell marks appeared on the fabric strip. He wove together the magic-dampening spell and the spell to hold Baldric motionless, finishing it slowly, though there was no real way to soften the blow.

Callisto's grip on his hand tightened briefly and his lips compressed together, but he didn't make a sound as some of his energy was siphoned into the spell. Mervyn winced for him, trying not to enjoy the rush of fairy energy that flowed through him and into the charm. "That should do it," Mervyn said, handing off the charm but not letting go of Callisto's hand. "Just tie it around his wrist or ankle and it will activate. No more energy required."

"Okay," Callisto said, sitting still for another moment before twisting his hand free of Mervyn's and standing. He was gone only a moment—Baldric wasn't too far away and it didn't take that long to tie a charm back on—and then Callisto was back at his side.

"Is your leg really okay?" Callisto said, frowning worriedly as he sat down, settling as comfortably as he could on the concrete floor next to Mervyn.

"It will be," Mervyn said, then glanced at his jacket. "Though Evandie is probably going to murder me for that."

"I can distract her?" Callisto offered, tilting his head as he smiled again.

"She does like you," Mervyn said thoughtfully, then laughed when he recalled Evandie's first impression of Callisto. "Though I think she thought you were a thief at first." Callisto blinked, so obviously bewildered that Mervyn had to laugh again. "You were wearing almost everything you owned, I believe, and were understandably jittery about being in a wizard's house."

"Oh, right," Callisto said, looking thoughtful. "I was cold."

"Yeah," Mervyn said softly, shifting closer to Callisto so he could wrap a friendly arm around his waist.

"Don't move," Callisto ordered crossly, gently touching Mervyn's crudely bandaged leg. He didn't protest the embrace though, just leaned closer to Mervyn.

"I wouldn't have, if you'd sat closer," Mervyn said easily. He hesitated, then reached out and tapped Callisto's charm. "Are you sure you're okay with this, Callisto?"

"I don't really have a lot of choice," Callisto said quietly, reaching up and touching it himself. Mervyn caught his hand as he went to lower it, casually tangling their fingers together. "I didn't—at first, I thought if I got my heart back, everything would go back to the way it was, but that... that wasn't ever going to be true."

"Probably not," Mervyn said, just as solemnly. Returning Callisto's heart to his chest would have required a lot of reconstructive work around his heart, to make up for the pieces carved out to make space for Baldric's heart charm.

"This really works, though," Callisto said quietly. "I don't—I don't know anything or anyone who could do better. I can't go home with this, but I really couldn't go home anyway."

"We—Denzil and I can help you get settled here," Mervyn promised. "I can even help you find a safe place to stay, though you're certainly welcome to stay at my house for however long you like."

"Thank you," Callisto said, hesitating briefly before kissing Mervyn on the cheek. "For everything."

"My pleasure," Mervyn said, quirked a smile at Callisto. "And that's the last thanks I want for this, all right? I want us to be equal partners in this relationship."

"Then I need to move out or pay rent," Callisto said solemnly, smiling shyly.

"I'd be willing to accept alternative forms of payment," Mervyn said, brushing his thumb over Callisto's cheek and kissing him briefly.

"I think we can work something out," Callisto said, leaning close and kissing Mervyn this time. Mervyn kissed back, keeping it simple and sweet, more than willing to ignore his various aches and pains and minor stab wounds to focus on Callisto.

An undeterminable amount of time later, Mervyn was abruptly recalled to where he was by Malone clearing his throat loudly from behind them. Mervyn looked up lazily, amused by the way Callisto turned bright red. He also looked thoroughly tousled, which Mervyn decided was a really good look for him.

"Are you two all right?" Malone asked, not seeming terribly concerned.

"Mervyn got stabbed," Callisto said, not even hesitating to volunteer that. "He shouldn't walk on his leg."

"I'll arrange for a ride for him," Malone said gravely, his expression not changing, but Mervyn could tell he was amused nonetheless. "Shall I have him carried to the front?"

"Yes," Callisto said.

"No," Mervyn said, at the same time.

"You don't even know if you can stand on it," Callisto said, frowning worriedly.

"I figured you'd knock me down if I tried to stand," Mervyn said cheerfully, amused when Callisto scowled stubbornly at him. "How about I try it now, with your help, and we'll see how my leg works before we consign me to being carried out?"

"Fine," Callisto conceded suspiciously after a moment, slowly detangling himself from Mervyn.

"On your way by, do you think you can unbind Baldric?" Malone asked, still far more amused than Mervyn would like him to be. "It will make it a lot easier for us to arrest him."

"Unbind him?" Mervyn asked curiously. It had to be something Callisto had done, since Mervyn's charm wouldn't interfere with Baldric being arrested.

"I tied him down with grass," Callisto said, shrugging. "It's one of the few things I know how to do with my magic."

"Ah," Mervyn said, letting go of Callisto's hand. Callisto gave him a brief smile before heading over to Baldric to deal with removing his grass bindings.

"Does Denzil know about that?" Malone asked, quirking a smile after Callisto.

"Not yet," Mervyn said easily. "Where is the idiot?"

"I stashed him at your place," Malone said, frowning briefly. "He should be okay. He just took a good knock to the head."

"Good," Mervyn said, wondering if he should tease before or after letting Denzil in on the change in his relationship with Callisto.

"I'll probably be dealing with processing this for a while, but if he wakes before I get the chance, let him know I'll be back to break the bond as soon as I have a free moment," Malone said, rubbing a hand over his head briefly.

"I will," Mervyn promised, smiling as Callisto returned to his side.

"I'll be by to take statements and the like at some point, too," Malone said, nodding to Callisto. "I'd appreciate it if you stayed in town for a few days, at least."

"I'll be at Mervyn's," Callisto said, then added thoughtfully. "Or Denzil's."

"Then you two can take off. Sev," Malone shouted to a guardsman nearby. "Arrange a ride for two, please. Pick up out front."

"Yes, sir," the guardsman said, then turned and jogged off towards the front of the warehouse.

Malone and Callisto helped Mervyn to his feet, and Callisto grudgingly agreed to let Mervyn walk—with the stipulations that Mervyn lean on him and take it slow, neither of which Mervyn protested.

By the time they reached the front of the warehouse, however, Mervyn was almost wishing he'd accepted the offer to be carried to the front. Callisto didn't say anything, thankfully, just helped him into their ride and sat extra close—for support—as they finally headed home.

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The library was quiet, only the sound of the occasional turned page or shift of motion breaking the silence. Callisto was trying to focus on the book he'd picked out, but it was difficult to concentrate with Mervyn sitting so close. They were sharing the small sofa in Callisto's usual reading nook, but Callisto couldn't do anything about it, because Denzil was also pretending to read, sitting in a nearby chair.

Mervyn was the only one who seemed to be paying attention to his book, though he was also taking notes at the same time, his notebook jostling against Callisto's leg every time he jotted down another note.

It had been nearly three days since they'd raided Baldric's warehouse, but Malone had yet to show up to let them know how it was progressing on his end. He also hadn't broken the bond with Denzil—something Mervyn had done with him after they'd stumbled into the house, before he'd even let Evandie fuss over his leg.

Denzil was obviously twitchier because of it. He was also watching Callisto and Mervyn more suspiciously, but Callisto wasn't going to volunteer anything. If Denzil wanted to know something about Callisto's relationship with Mervyn, he'd have to ask.

"This is ridiculous," Denzil said, snapping his book shut loudly and making Callisto jump. "It's been three days. Where is he?"

"Probably very busy," Mervyn said distractedly, finishing whatever note he was writing before looking up at Denzil over the top of his spectacles. "This was a big case, Denzil, and I'm sure there's plenty of processing and other things he has to do before he can get away."

"Right, and they wouldn't let him get away to sleep?" Denzil asked skeptically. Callisto picked up Mervyn's notebook and pen, ignoring Mervyn's half-scrawled notes to doodle in the corner of the page. Mervyn glanced at him with a brief smile, but didn't say anything.

"Malone is a workaholic," Mervyn said, shrugging and brushing shoulders with Callisto. "He'll be by as soon as he's able."

"What are you working on?" Callisto asked, adding a few more lines to the very simple drawing of Denzil sulking in his chair.

"A shield charm, of sorts," Mervyn said. "In case you encounter another counter charm, it would either block or absorb the effects of it instead of it affecting your heart."

"Oh," Callisto said, finishing his little sketch. "That's a good idea."

"The problem is that counters tend to stop all magic, not just some of it," Mervyn said thoughtfully, frowning down at his book again. "I think there might be something in the standard counter that I can block, though, if I can just work it out..."

Callisto smiled, amused at how distracted Mervyn obviously was by his puzzle. He pushed the notebook back into Mervyn's lap, setting the pen on top of it.

"You encountered a counter?" Denzil asked, obviously displeased.

"Yes, Denzil," Mervyn said patiently. "I told you that. It's what made all the charms I was carrying useless."

"Oh, right," Denzil muttered, still not looking happy. "Until you get that shield working, no more taking Callisto dangerous places."

Callisto rolled his eyes. "Where would I go?"

"I don't know, but Mervyn is into all sorts of crazy things," Denzil said irritably, waving a hand dismissively at them.

Mervyn shook his head, but just said, "I promise I won't take him anywhere dangerous. Unless... do the downtown markets count? They could be considered dangerous."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Denzil grouched, slumping in his chair sulkily. "They're only dangerous to your wallet, especially if Evandie wheedles her way into going with you."

Mervyn stifled a smile, his eyes flicking past Denzil's chair towards the doorway. Callisto followed his gaze, unsurprised to find Evandie standing in the doorway, a sour look on her face. She cleared her throat, giving Denzil a disapproving look before turning to Mervyn.

"Your Investigator friend is here," she announced.

"Can you show him in here, Evandie?" Mervyn asked, shifting his injured leg with a grimace, and Callisto smiled briefly, pleased that Mervyn was heeding his earlier threats to not move unnecessarily.

Evandie nodded stiffly, turning and leaving as quietly as she'd arrived.

"I'm going to get the world's most bitter tea, now," Denzil grumbled, sitting up in his chair and looking completely grumpy as Malone walked in. He looked like he had been working for the last three days with little or no rest. Callisto frowned worriedly, but he didn't really know Malone well enough to say anything.

Malone stopped next to Denzil's chair and Denzil glared at him but didn't say anything.

"My apologies," Malone said gruffly. "I hadn't anticipated—" He stopped, shrugging.

"Oh, just break it already," Denzil snapped, offering his hand. A brief smile flickered across Malone's face before he obliged, taking Denzil's hand and muttering the words that deactivated the bond.

Callisto wondered what it felt like normally, without the rush of pain. It had felt odd afterwards—he'd gotten sort of used to feeling Mervyn's quiet presence—but the way the bond activated and deactivated normally was a mystery to him.

Malone released Denzil's hand almost immediately after speaking the last word to break the bond. Denzil didn't look uncomfortable about it breaking, just took his hand back and scowled anew at Malone.

"So what took you?" Denzil demanded, before Malone even got the chance to sit down. Malone ignored him for the moment, moving over to the closest free chair—across from the sofa—and sitting down.

"My superior has limited the number of people working on this case," Malone said slowly, running a hand over his head. His hair was growing out again, Callisto noted, wondering with a bit of guilt if Malone really had been working since they'd left him. "What Baldric was working on... it would panic a lot of fairies and interest the wrong sort of wizards, so we're trying to keep it contained to as few Investigators as possible."

"Which means more work for you," Mervyn said, smiling ruefully. "Sorry to dump this in your lap, Malone."

"I don't mind," Malone said, sounding tired. "I need to get the official statements from you two about your parts of it. That's officially why I'm here."

"And unofficially?" Mervyn asked. Callisto tensed—he was sick of bad news—and Mervyn casually twined their fingers together.

"Baldric definitely had a hand in the previous attacks, and he was solely responsible for yours," Malone began, nodding at Callisto. "However, the more we process his equipment and notes, the clearer it becomes that he's not the man behind the whole thing."

"That was the impression he gave me, when we confronted him in the warehouse," Mervyn said slowly. "Does that mean Callisto and Denzil are still in danger?"

"Denzil, yes," Malone said, frowning briefly when Denzil made to reply to that. "Callisto, probably not. My impression is that Baldric was responsible for finding... subjects for the man really behind this operation. It appears he simply took advantage of finding Callisto."

"I'm going home," Denzil announce abruptly, sitting up straight.

"Home?" Callisto echoed, baffled. Did Denzil mean his home in the city or home with their parents?

"You need more than what you brought with you," Denzil said impatiently. "I was going to put it off for a few more weeks, but it sounds like now is a good time for me to leave town for a while."

"That's sensible," Mervyn said, and he smiled sweetly when Denzil glared at him.

"I'll tell them what happened," Denzil said, frowning. "Hopefully they won't be idiots about it."

"I doubt it," Callisto said, shrugging. He wasn't okay with that, but... their parents were paranoid, and given the nature of Baldric's attack, they'd cut ties as completely as they could.

"Well, they're stupid," Denzil declared angrily, scowling at nothing. "They're not going to have anyone to take over the orchards now, and you were good for it."

"I guess," Callisto said, smiling faintly but not really enthused. The orchards had been his life, really, and while he didn't know much else, he did know he didn't want to work the orchards for the rest of his life.

Mervyn squeezed his hand, offering a smile, and Callisto smiled back a little more easily. Living here wouldn't be bad at all, he thought, and it was probably stupid to be so optimistic when he had a charm instead of a heart, but it really could be worse. He could be dead.

"I'll spread it around that Nan is looking for new help since you left town," Malone said slowly, then grimaced. "She's going to blister me something fierce for it, though."

Denzil grinned, apparently pleased by that prospect. "You can tell her I'm leaving, too."

Malone sighed, but just nodded, fishing out a battered little notebook from the folds of his jacket. As he flipped through it, Evandie reappeared with a laden tray. She passed out steaming cups of tea to everyone but Malone, who received both a steaming mug of coffee and a plate piled high with leftovers from last night's supper.

Malone thanked her profusely, earning a smile, and he drank down half his coffee before she left again.

"Mervyn, would you mind coming down to the station to identify some of the instruments we've confiscated from Baldric?" Malone asked, ignoring his food in favor of his coffee for the moment. "You have more health magic than I or any of the other Investigators working this case do."

"Sure," Mervyn said, agreeing easily. "Give me a day or two and I should be able to hobble around without too much trouble."

"I'll arrange a ride for you," Malone said, making a note.

"Have you thought of looking at Janan's team for the man really behind this?" Mervyn asked, frowning pensively. "I don't think Janan would be that stupid, as he's very invested in his career at the hospital. He wouldn't do anything to endanger that, but the others on his team would have access to both Baldric and the equipment to perform such operations."

"It's on my list to check out," Malone said gravely. "I'm going to get what I can from Baldric before I go any further with that part of the investigation."

Mervyn nodded, setting aside his notebook and the book he'd been working with. He shifted his injured leg with a grimace, sitting up straighter but not letting go of Callisto's hand.

"Would you like our statements as you eat?" Mervyn asked, picking up his tea one-handed. Callisto finally let go of Mervyn's other hand, leaning forward to pick up his own tea cup. Denzil caught his eye, smirking, but Callisto just rolled his eyes, sitting back with a smile.

"Sure," Malone said, flipping a few pages of his notebook. "Mervyn, you start."

Mervyn nodded, speaking slowly as he recounted what had happened in the warehouse, for the third time. He kept to the story he'd told Denzil, which was much more accurate than the highly abridged version he'd given Evandie.

Malone took short little notes as Mervyn spoke, either noting in shorthand or marking down only the most important bits. He pointed to Callisto wordlessly when Mervyn was done, and Callisto dutifully told his part of it, starting from Mervyn telling him to run to finding Malone and Denzil to throwing tools at Baldric.

He may have faltered a little when he got to the part where Baldric threw his rotting heart at him, but Malone politely ignored it and Denzil didn't interrupt. Mervyn simply rested a hand on Callisto's thigh, and it was easier to say than he'd expected.

"I'll let you know if I have any follow-up questions," Malone said, jotting a few things down after Callisto finished. "This should be sufficient, however. Are you staying here for the foreseeable future or somewhere else in the city?"

"Here," Callisto said at the same time Mervyn did. Callisto glanced at him, cracking a smile, and Denzil snorted in amusement.

"I figured," Malone said, making a last note in his notepad before flipping it shut.

"Why?" Denzil asked, somewhat sharply. "Why did you figure? I could have set him up somewhere else."

"Not after the display they gave me and the other Investigators at Baldric's warehouse," Malone said dryly, and Callisto flushed, sinking down in his seat slightly.

"Display? Mervyn," Denzil said, rounding on their sofa and Callisto didn't miss the flash of smile that crossed Malone's face before he applied himself diligently to the remaining food on his pate. "Are you taking advantage of my brother?"

"Yes," Mervyn said dryly, scooting his hand up Callisto's thigh slightly. Callisto immediately smacked Mervyn's chest, trying to ignore the way his face heated.

"Stop that," Callisto said, and Mervyn laughed, but obligingly removed his hand. He grinned at Callisto, and Callisto smiled back, unable to not.

"Ugh," Denzil said, and Callisto turned towards him and made a face. "What? I'm not the one being disgustingly cute and sappy."

"At least I'm cute," Callisto retorted, then rolled his eyes. He was usually better at not rising to Denzil's taunts.

"I'm going to pack," Denzil decided abruptly, standing. "Tell Shalla that I'll be back in a few weeks or a few months, depending on how quickly my parents run me off. Mervyn, take good care of Callisto. I'll stab you someplace worse than a leg if you hurt him."

"Denzil," Callisto said, exasperated.

"Yes, Denzil," Mervyn said, as though Denzil hadn't just threatened him with grievous bodily harm.

"Good," Denzil said, apparently satisfied. "Callisto, write me a list of anything you want me to get while I am there."

Callisto nodded. There wasn't much, but he could tell Denzil where he'd hidden some of his art supplies. Denzil hesitated a brief moment more before turning and leaving the library.

"I think I will steal the sofa in your receiving room, if you don't mind," Malone said, setting his dirty dishes on the table before him.

"You can borrow my bed," Mervyn offered, but Malone shook his head.

"I'm only stealing a few hours," Malone said, grimacing. "A bed would tempt me to linger overlong."

"All right," Mervyn acquiesced, frowning worriedly after Malone as he headed out of the library. As soon as the door shut, however, he turned to Callisto expectantly.

"What?" Callisto asked, fighting a smile because he knew exactly what.

"Denzil knows," Mervyn said, tilting his head towards Callisto slightly. "And I've stayed off my leg for the last three days except when necessary."

"I don't know," Callisto said slowly, drawing it out. "I don't think it was necessary for you to walk past that empty chair there to sit next to me."

"Oh, it was completely necessary, I promise," Mervyn said, smiling slowly. He casually pushed a few locks of Callisto's hair from his forehead, and Callisto shifted forward, steadying himself with a light touch on Mervyn's uninjured leg. Mervyn met him halfway, sinking his hand into Callisto's hair and kissing him firmly. Callisto returned the kiss immediately, wondering why he'd even bothered to give Mervyn even a token protest, as Mervyn's kisses made his head spin and incited the most pleasant sensations.

"Dizzy," Callisto muttered against Mervyn's lips, about to take another kiss when Mervyn frowned, pulling away fractionally.

"Good dizzy or bad dizzy?" Mervyn asked, sliding a hand down Callisto's chest to where the charm resided beneath his shirt.

"Good dizzy," Callisto reassured, smiling. "Though you can keep testing it, if you like."

Mervyn laughed, replying with another kiss instead of words, and Callisto returned it wholeheartedly, happy right where he was.

